

# How To Get Your Public Relations Money's Worth

By Robert A. Kelly

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Regardless of what business we're in, we all want the value – let's call it "money's worth" -- we paid for up-front at the beginning of any program we undertake. Like, for instance, the money's worth implicit in the underlying premise of public relations. Namely, people act on their own perception of the facts before them, leading to behaviors about which something can be done. When public relations creates, changes or reinforces that opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-desired-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization, the public relations mission is accomplished and your money's worth received.

What that suggests, of course, is that you keep your eye on a project's end game to make CERTAIN you get the planned behavior modification you agreed to back when the activity got underway.

How can we be more successful in life than achieving the goal we set at the beginning of ANY effort? We can't! It's pure success and, in public relations, a sure way of getting your money's worth.

Why do I feel so strongly about the fundamental premise of public relations? Because some of us have learned from leaders in the field, from mentors and from long years of experience that there are only three ways a public relations effort can impact behavior: create opinion where it doesn't exist, reinforce existing opinion or change that opinion.

No surprise that the process by which those goals are realized is known as public relations. While behavior is the goal, and a host of communications tactics are the tools, our strategy is the leverage provided by public opinion.

Which means the first money's worth is the fundamental value that alters target audience perceptions and, thus, behaviors and helps you get where you want to be.

Next is tactical money's worth. Carefully selected communications tactics are the work horses of public relations. They are effective communications carriers designed to reach target audiences containing specially tailored, persuasive

messages aimed at influencing target audience perception and, thus, behavior.

The list of available communications tactics is long, flexible and richly diverse. It offers us effective message carriers ranging from media publicity, special events, sponsorships and financial communications to public speeches, awards programs, brochures, annual reports, the worldwide Internet and many, many more.

In the process, the employer/client receives yet another, essential money's worth when public relations gains and holds the understanding and acceptance of those target audiences, those publics, without which his or her organization cannot prosper.

At the same time, you get reputational value because, during the problem solving process, the organization's reputation is or should be burnished.

And that delivers enormous value to any organization because it strengthens its ability to pursue successfully its goals and objectives. And this, in turn, allows it to meet its obligations to society as a good corporate, association or 501-c-3 citizen.

There's still more money's worth to come – now you get measurement value. In other words, gathering evidence for those paying the bill that the communications tactics have actually changed behaviors.

You should look for signs of measured success via Internet chatter, in print and broadcast news coverage, reports from the field, letters-to-the-editor, consumer and customer reactions, shareholder letters, comments from community leaders and other feedback.

Even more specific, you're not going to get your public relations money's worth if you fail to deal with what I call unattended perceptions among those audiences most important to achieving your objectives.

What would you do if your information gathering showed potentially damaging, yet unattended perceptions out there among target audiences vitally important to your organization?

Fact is, to get your public relations money's worth, perceptions among your most important audiences **MUST** be monitored regularly and, to the extent possible, their concerns reconciled with both the interests of your own organizations and, of course, the public interest and the law of the land.

Fortunately, in the crucible of battle, an action pathway begins to emerge allowing us to track how each key audience perceives our organization, particularly watching for any abrupt changes in perception. Let's call that a tracking mechanism that Identifies The Problem.

Now we can Set The Public Relations Goal. For example, take immediate action to correct the perception and behavior imbalance, and do so as soon as possible.

Next, we need a Public Relations Strategy to meet that

goal and deal with any imbalance. We have only three choices: create opinion where there isn't any, change existing opinion, or reinforce it. Here, we try to establish clearly what degree of behavior modification we expect to achieve because that's how we'll know to what extent we have succeeded. Then, we carefully Prioritize Our Target Audiences starting, for example, with customers, prospects and employees, and following with minority relations and regulatory agencies. At this point, we Prepare Persuasive Messages designed to change any negative perceptions we discovered. Following which we select those Effective Communications Tactics to carry those persuasive messages to our target audiences. At last we come to the end game – did we meet the behavior modification goal we established up front? If we did, our public relations program is successful. If we didn't, we must re-evaluate our goal, strategy, messages, communications tactics and our audience perception data gathering methods, and adjust them for the next effort. The best part is this: when the behavioral changes become apparent, and meet the program's original behavior modification goal, three satisfying values are realized: One, the public relations program IS a success. Two, by achieving the behavioral goal you set at the beginning, you are using a dependable and accurate public relations performance measurement. And three, when our "reach, persuade and move-to-desired-action" efforts produce a visible modification in the behaviors of those people you wish to influence, you are using public relations' core value to its very best advantage insuring that you really do receive your public relations money's worth.

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