

How to Hit the Public Relations Bullseye (the first time)

By Robert A. Kelly

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So, what IS a public relations bullseye? The public relations professional must modify somebody's behavior if he or she is to hit that bullseye and earn a paycheck – everything else is a means to that end.

Here's why. In public relations, a bullseye can mean survival when it successfully changes the perceptions and, hence, the behaviors of certain groups of people important to the success of the organization. In other words, when those changes clearly meet the original behavior modification goal set at the beginning of the program, the public relations effort is successful and scores the bullseye.

But, is public relations really equipped to do that? Yes, because its roots are planted deeply in the principle that people act on their own perceptions of the facts. When public relations successfully creates, changes or reinforces public opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization, it accomplishes its mission – a bullseye!

How it works.

- 1) The public relations effort should be focused on the three realities alluded to above:
 - 0 People act on their perception of the facts;
 - 0 Perceptions lead to behaviors;
 - 0 Something can be done about those perceptions and behaviors that leads to achieving the organization's operating objectives.
- 2) Identify the key operating problem to be addressed.

One example could be a national marketer of furniture imported from the Far East. News reports and other input, amplified by competitive trouble-making out in the trade, suggest there

are quality problems in the company's factories in Southeast Asia.

3) Verify truth or falsity of the allegations.

Because the company's sales have leveled off and are starting to decline, public relations counsel and staff, working closely with the company's manufacturing people here and abroad, establish conclusively that reports and rumors of declining quality are without foundation, and simply untrue.

4) Verify status of both consumer and trade perceptions of the company's product quality.

Probing consumer opinion through personal contact and informal polling out in the market place, counsel and staff determine that, in fact, there IS a disturbing perception that the company's furniture line is "of low quality and not worth the prices asked."

It is useful to recall here that public relations problems are often defined by what people think about a set of facts, as opposed to the actual truth of the matter. Here, it is clear that negative trade and consumer perceptions about the company's products, however inaccurate they may be, account for the decline in showroom traffic and sales, and must be confronted.

5) Establish the public relations goal.

The goal is to begin the process of changing public perception of the company's furniture quality from negative to positive, leading to consumer behavioral changes, in turn attracting furniture buyers to company showrooms once again.

6) Determine the public relations strategy

Will it be to CREATE opinion where none exists, CHANGE existing opinion, or REINFORCE that existing opinion? In this case, it is clear that considerable existing opinion has turned negative on the quality of the company's furniture, so the public relations strategy will be to CHANGE that opinion from negative to positive.

7) Establish the perception and modification goals.

Goals here will be measured in terms of customers returning to the showrooms, along with increasing sales, in the first three to six months following the program's kickoff, which obviously will require considerable communications firepower to achieve. Once the negative perceptions are truly understood, such a marker can be set down, and agreed upon, establishing the degree of behavioral change that realistically can be expected.

8) Identify the key audiences

Public relations counsel and staff start with a priority-ranking of those audiences with a clear interest in the organization, often referred to as “stakeholders” or “publics.” In this case, at the top of the list is the furniture-buying public – prospects and customers – as well as the trade and business communities, employees, local thought-leaders and media in the company’s retail outlet locations, and a number of other possible stakeholder groups.

9) Prepare persuasive messages.

Bringing those important target audiences around to one’s way of thinking depends heavily on the quality of the message prepared for each of them.

It’s not easy. The messages must disarm the rumors with clear evidence of excellent design and construction quality, and seconded by credible third-party endorsements such as satisfied customers and top design consultants. They will impart a sense of credibility to the company’s statements. Regular assessments of how opinion is currently running among target groups must be performed, constantly adjusting the message and, finally, action-producing incentives for individuals to take the desired actions must be identified and built into each message.

Those incentives might include the very strength of the company’s forthright position on the quality issue, plans for expansion that hold the promise of more jobs and taxes, or sponsorship of new furniture design shows on local cable channels.

10) Select the most effective communications tactics and commence action

How will target audiences in the various company locations actually be reached? Choices include face-to-face meetings, hand-placed feature articles and broadcast appearances, special consumer briefings, news releases, announcement luncheons, onsite media interviews, facility tours, promotional contests, brochures and a variety of other communications tactics.

Special events are especially effective in reaching target audiences with the message. They are newsworthy by definition and include activities such as financial roadshows, awards ceremonies, trade conventions, celebrity appearances and open houses.

The effort can be accelerated, even amplified by carefully

selecting the most efficient tactics such as print or broadcast media, key podium presentations or top-level personal contacts because, when these tools communicate with each target audience, they must score direct bullseyes.

Equally important to the success of the action program will be the selection and perceived credibility of the actual spokespeople who deliver the messages. They must speak with authority and conviction if meaningful media coverage is to be achieved.

11) Monitor progress and seek signs of improvement

Public relations counsel and staff must speak regularly with members of each target audience, monitor print and broadcast media for evidence of the company's messages or viewpoints, and conduct a variety of interactions with key customers, prospects and influentials.

Indicators that the messages are moving opinion in the company's direction will start appearing. Indicators like comments in community business meetings, local newspaper editorials, e-mails from members of target audiences as well as public references by political figures and local celebrities.

Now, the action program should begin to gain and hold the kind of public understanding and acceptance that will lead to the desired shift in public behavior. Executed correctly – especially against the reality of plunging sales -- we're talking about nothing less than the organization's survival.

12) And the end-game?

When the changes in behaviors become truly apparent through increased showroom traffic, media reports, thought-leader comment, employee and community chatter and a variety of other feedback – in other words, clearly meeting the original behavior modification goal -- the public relations program can be deemed a success.

In the end, a sound strategy combined with effective tactics leads directly to the bottom line – altered perceptions, modified behaviors, a happy CEO and a public relations bullseye.

end

Bob Kelly, public relations consultant, was director of public relations for Pepsi-Cola Co.; AGM-Public Relations, Texaco Inc.; VP-Public Relations, Olin Corp.; VP-Public Relations, Newport News Shipbuilding & Drydock Co.; director of communications, U.S. Department of the Interior, and deputy assistant press secretary, The White House. <mailto:bobkelly@TNI.net>

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