

Ignore PR at Your Peril!

By Robert A. Kelly

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If you do, it means:

1. you don't value tracking the perceptions of important outside audiences whose behaviors could sink your ship:
2. you don't care about setting a public relations goal designed to correct misconceptions, inaccuracies or rumors that can hurt you;
3. you care even less about strategies to get you from here to that PR goal you already don't care about;
4. and you certainly don't value the persuasive messages you need to convince your key outside audiences that their damaging perceptions of your enterprise are dead wrong.

Man, that's risky and an awful lot not to care about!

Actually, I don't believe you don't care, and I don't believe you're really ignoring public relations. If you were, by now your organization would be on its last legs, Kaput!, Morto!

In fact, you may be a closet PR person who knows better. Why you may even buy the fundamental premise of public relations:

"People act on their own perception of the facts before them, which leads to predictable behaviors about which something can be done. When we create, change or reinforce that opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-desired-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization, the public relations mission is accomplished."

I'll bet you're also pretty darn good at monitoring what that #1 external audience thinks about you and your organization. And that you regularly interact with them asking questions

like What do you think of us? Why? while watching for negative undertones, wrong-headed beliefs or misconceptions.

And that means you'll be anxious to create a public relations goal that corrects such misconceptions because they can lead directly to negative behaviors that will hurt you.

In practice, your goal may be focused on pacifying an activist group, reinforcing prospect interest in your product or service, or even countering a painful rumor.

You're probably ahead of me in forming the strategy you need to reach that goal. For better or worse, there are only three ways to deal with opinion or perception problems. Create some all-new opinion where none exists, change existing opinion, or reinforce it.

With goal and strategy both in hand, you now have some real work to do. What will you need to say to your key audience members to persuade them to your way of thinking? You must be clear about what should be corrected or clarified. You must also be persuasive, and your facts and figures believable. And if appropriate, try to be compelling, perhaps with a certain sense of urgency.

Your "foot soldiers" – communications tactics – can now carry that hard-won message to the attention of your #1 target audience, and there are scads of them just waiting for you to send them into action. For example, speeches, news releases, brochures, special events, radio interviews and one-on-one meetings.

One question remains. How do you tell whether or not you are making any headway with your public relations effort?

You again interact with members of that key audience of yours. And yes, with questions very similar to those you asked during your original information gathering exercise at the start of the program. Only this time, you are more interested in whether your communications tactics have moved perceptions in your direction.

Do the new responses show signs that you were successful in changing that inaccurate belief? Or correcting that misconception? Or killing that dangerous rumor for good?

Not enough movement? Take another look at your message to see if it is really compelling. Is it honestly persuasive? Are your facts supportive of your goal and strategy? Is it written clearly enough?

I want to reemphasize that what you are looking for at this stage is a strong indication that your efforts have clearly

moved perceptions and target audience behaviors in the desired direction.

When this second monitoring drill allows that conclusion, you will have good reason to value highly your public relations goal, strategy, message and communications tactics.

Together, they will have made it possible for you to say, as promised in the fundamental premise, "My public relations mission is accomplished."

end

Bob Kelly counsels, writes and speaks about the fundamental premise of public relations. He has been DPR, Pepsi-Cola Co.; AGM-PR, Texaco Inc.; VP-PR, Olin Corp.; VP-PR, 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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