

# Is PR All About Image? NO!!

By Robert A. Kelly

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That's like asking if advertising is all about type faces and photography. The answer to both questions is a teeth-clenched "of course not!"

What public relations IS all about, rather than hollow images, is the very real business of dealing effectively with target audience perceptions and behaviors that have a major effect on an organization.

For example, sales prospects who perceive your product as overpriced and are busy taking their buying power elsewhere; or employees who believe you don't give a tinker's damn about them and have dangerously reduced your productivity; or local citizens who believe, true or not, that you dump bad stuff into the river, thus keeping a negative media spotlight trained on your organization.

To answer the headline one more time, public relations is all about insuring that such results don't happen in the first place.

First, if those involved in the examples above had been regularly monitoring those target audiences, they would have had ample warning and the time needed to take corrective action.

So regularly monitoring those key external audiences is a must. What are they thinking about your business, if anything? Are perception problems looming? Are follow-on behaviors developing as a result?

The answers to those questions allow you to set a public relations goal, generally corrective in nature. Examples: you determine that your prices are not only fair, but below several competitors and you plan to publicize and promote that fact; or you plan to meet regularly with employees, listen to them and do something about their complaints,

if you can; or you meet with the activist group and share with them the State Environmental Agency's finding that you are in complete compliance with disposal regulations.

With the public relations goal set, we obviously need a strategy designed to reach that goal. And this could be the least complex step in the problem solving sequence because there are only three possible strategies available to us – create opinion where there is none, change existing opinion, or reinforce it. That's it! It must be one of those.

In the three cases outlined above, you clearly would be aiming to change existing opinions.

Next on the public relations agenda are the persuasive messages needed to change that existing opinion. You must design them carefully and creditably to counter the misconceptions you uncover, such as those above. Run them by folks outside your organization so that you get an idea of just HOW persuasive they are (or are not!).

Now, we need to assign a few "beasts of burden" communications tactics to actually carry our persuasive messages directly to the eyes and ears of our key target audiences. Fortunately, we have available to us scores of tactics. Everything from newspaper interviews, on-camera appearances, live radio interviews and in-person meetings to brochures, speeches, op-eds, special events and editorial board meetings.

Which suggests that you consider working with a professional public relations advisor because you probably have neither the time nor expertise to handle this work.

Now, it's back to the monitoring chore to measure how many individuals received the message (and through what medium), and how many are aware of the message content. Monitoring at this point also let's us make mid-course corrections by adjusting both message content and the mix of communications tactics.

As time passes, and your monitoring of target audience opinion progresses, you will begin to notice growing signs of awareness of your business, of yourself as its proprietor, and of its role in the marketplace and the community.

It is now that you will become a believer in public relations's ability to strengthen your business relationships with those important, external audiences. People who hold in their hands not a hollow image of your business, but through their patronage and support, the actual success of your enterprise.

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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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