

# Is Your Public Relations Investment Paying Off?

By Robert A. Kelly

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Robert A. Kelly  
bobbkelly@TNI.net

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You'll never know unless you set the right kind of goal at the beginning -- a goal against which progress can be measured, and a goal that flows directly from public relations strategies and tactics like those discussed below.

In my opinion, you must keep your eye on the end-game because the reason we do public relations in the first place is to change the behaviors of certain groups of people important to the success of our organization.

Another way of saying that? What we REALLY care about is modifying the behavior of those we wish to influence. Ask yourself this question: do we employ public relations for the sheer pleasure of writing news releases, running special events, doing surveys or booking speeches? Some folks may actually think so, but I believe the answer to that question is no. We employ public relations so that, at the end of the day, somebody's behavior gets modified.

- o you may wish to influence people to begin thinking more positively about your organization, thus strengthening its reputation.
- o or encourage them to begin buying your soft drink brand by communicating its great taste and refreshing flavor.
- o it could be as simple as communicating a company's strengths to a target audience leading them to invest in the company's shares.
- o or even providing environmental activists with the facts about the company's full compliance with Federal regulations, in the hope they will bring their plant-site demonstrations to an end.

But remember: until you have a solid indication that target behaviors have, in fact, changed in ways that meet your primary behavior modification goal, you DON'T know if your investment has paid off.

So, let's look at ways to increase one's comfort level about that public relations investment. Here are five steps, that can help you hit the public relations bullseye – desired behavior modification -- on your next public relations venture.

## Step 1 Accept the Fact That People Act on their Perception of the Facts

Many behavioral experts agree that people really do act on THEIR perception of the facts, and that

how they react to those facts actually does affect their behaviors. It follows that individual understanding of those facts must be continually informed if those behaviors are to help achieve the organization's goal and objectives.

A simple, but effective illustration of this dynamic at work, is the investor considering the purchase of company shares. With the facts available to him or her at the moment, he/she forms a perception of the company. Unsupported though they may be, should those facts cast doubt on the company's future, it's safe to say that the investor's negative perception of the company will lead to a certain behavior, namely, no shares are purchased.

Public relations counsel, alerted to the negative perception about the company through continuous media monitoring, opinion sampling and thoughtleader contact, moves rapidly to communicate accurate sales and financial data to the investment community. In due course, this leads to perception and behavioral changes on the part of many investors -- namely, towards a decision to buy the company's shares.

## Step 2 Create, Change or Reinforce Opinion

Here, after assessing opinion among your target audiences through media monitoring, opinion sampling and thought-leader contact, you must decide whether you will create or change or reinforce public opinion within each target audience. Choosing the correct mode -- 1) reinforcing existing opinion, 2) creating new opinion from scratch or 3) changing current and possibly long-held views -- is obviously central to your message preparation strategy and its copy approach. Each must be written to carefully reflect the timing of the action being taken.

## Step 3 Reach, Persuade and Move-to-Action

Now, you must reach, persuade and move-to-action those people whose behaviors will affect your organization. That includes, among others, a variety of stakeholders including customers, employees, prospects, retirees, media, legislators and regulators, and both financial and plant communities.

Reaching these target groups means applying the most effective communications tools available to you. Among others, these will include such tactics as media relations and publicity-generating news conferences and press releases, newsletters and e-mails, high-profile speeches, charitable contributions, investor relations and informal opinion surveys.

Special events will be high on the action list: newsworthy events like trade shows, open houses, awards ceremonies, contests, VIP receptions, financial roadshows, and even media-attracting stunts. On the marketing side, you will want to target your sales-oriented communications to help build brand franchise, win consumer acceptance and gain competitive advantage.

Persuading these important groups of stakeholders to your way of thinking depends heavily on the message you prepare for each target audience. You must understand and identify what is really at issue at the moment; impart a sense of credibility to your comments; perform regular assessments of how opinion is currently running among that group, constantly adjusting your message; as well as highlighting those key issue points most likely to engage their attention and involvement; and finally, identify and build into your messages pre-tested, action-producing incentives for individuals to take the actions you desire.

Moving your target group to action, hopefully with a mix of activity such as the above, can be accelerated, even amplified by careful selection of the media to reach your target audience. This applies whether, among others, it's print or broadcast media, key podium presentations or a series

of top level personal contacts, and they all must communicate clearly and directly to your target audiences.

Of equal importance to the success of your program will be the selection and perceived credibility of the actual spokespeople who will deliver your messages. They must have stature in their industries, and speak with authority, personal confidence and conviction if meaningful media coverage is to be achieved.

#### Step 4 Gain and Hold Understanding and Acceptance

By this time, your action program should begin to gain and hold the kind of public understanding and acceptance that leads to the desired shift in public behavior.

Signs that your messages are turning some opinion in your direction should appear. A chance comment in a business meeting, a popular columnist's observations, e-mails from interested parties or co-worker alerts that this political figure or that local celebrity made public references to your topic, should begin to build. Many of these indicators, each reflecting the state of individual perception, will gradually begin to reflect the modified behaviors you have in mind.

#### Step 5 Modify the Behavior, Achieve your Goal

When the changes in behaviors become truly apparent through media reports, thought-leader comment, employee and community chatter and other feedback, at the same time clearly meeting your original behavior modification goal, your public relations program can be deemed a success.

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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