

Let's Blow The Lid Off Public Relations

By Robert A. Kelly

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And show it for what it is – a well-oiled strategy machine using cutting-edge communications tactics that lead directly to program success. And all because perceptions were altered, behaviors modified and the employer/client satisfied with the end result.

When everybody benefits like that, blowing the lid off public relations is not only justified, it's necessary!

Do you take the core strengths of public relations into account as you manage those communications tactics?

Because if you don't, you're missing the sweet-spot of public relations. The communications tactics you use must work together to create the behavioral change you want in certain groups of people important to the success of your business.

But NO organization – business, non-profit, association or public sector – can succeed today unless the behaviors of its most important audiences are in-sync with the organization's objectives.

For your business, that means public relations professionals must modify somebody's behavior if they are to help hit your objective – all else are means to that end.

Which is why, when public relations goes on to successfully create, change or reinforce public opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-desired-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization, it accomplishes its mission.

How can we be so certain? Question: how can you measure the results of an activity more accurately than when you clearly achieve the goal you set at the beginning of that activity? You can't. It defines success.

Public relations is no different. The client/employer wants our help in altering counterproductive perceptions among key audiences which almost always change behaviors in a way that helps him or her get to where they want to be.

Now, to achieve that goal, public relations practitioners must be skilled in many tactical disciplines. Everything from media relations, public speaking and a dozen kinds of writing to financial communications, special events, issue tracking and crisis management, to name just a few.

But too often, the employer/client's tendency is to see little beyond a tactic's immediate impact. For example, a speech and how it was received, a news release and how it was picked up and presented in a newspaper or on TV, or a special event and the audience's reaction.

Of course those concerns are understandable and shouldn't be lightly dismissed. But the question also must be asked, to what end are we applying those tactics?

Well, WHY do we employ public relations tactics anyway? Could it be for the pure pleasure of doing surveys, making speeches or editing company magazines? Not likely. We employ public relations so that, at the end of the day, somebody's behavior gets modified.

That leads us directly to the core strength of public relations: people act on their perception of the facts; those perceptions lead to certain behaviors; and something can be done about those perceptions and behaviors that leads to achieving an organization's objectives.

To assess those behavior changes and, thus, the degree of success the core public relations program has achieved, look for evidence that your tactics have actually changed behavior. Signs should begin showing up via Internet chatter, in print and broadcast news coverage, reports from the field, letters-to-the-editor, consumer and customer reactions, shareholder letters and comments from community leaders.

Consider doing informal polls of employees, retirees, industrial neighbors and local businesses as well as collecting feedback from suppliers, elected officials, union leaders and government agencies.

The point of this article is that the core strength of public relations places a special burden on each tactic selected to carry the message to a target audience: does it/will it make a tangible, action-producing contribution towards altering target audience perceptions and behaviors? If not, it should be dropped and replaced with a tactic that does.

That way, only the strongest tactics will be used allowing public relations to apply its core strength to the challenge at hand: create, change or reinforce public opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-desired-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization.

What do I believe the employer/client wants from us? I believe s/he wants us to use our expertise in a way that helps achieve his or her business objectives. But regardless of what strategic plan we create to solve a problem, regardless of what tactical program we put in place, when all is said and done, we must modify somebody's behavior if we are to earn our keep.

So, not one, not two, but three benefits result when the behavioral changes become apparent, and meet the program's original behavior modification goal: First and most important, the public relations effort is a success.

Second, by achieving the behavioral goal you set at the beginning, you are taking advantage of a dependable and accurate public relations performance measurement.

Finally, when the "reach, persuade and move-to-desired-action" efforts produce a visible, and desired modification in the behaviors of those people you wish to influence, you are using public relations' core strength to its full benefit.

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.

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