

Managers Who Leave PR to Others

By Robert A. Kelly

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You're a business, non-profit or association manager who needs to achieve your organizational objectives on schedule. Since public relations should be helping you do just that, why leave it wholly in the hands of others?

In your own best interest, get personally involved in your public relations effort and ask the PR team servicing your department, division or subsidiary a few questions.

Are they focused on a workable, comprehensive plan for producing those key external audience behaviors like customers coming back for repeat purchases; new prospects starting to sniff around; capital donors asking for more information, and others deciding to specify your services or products, and similar good stuff?

Ask the PR folks how they feel about using the fundamental premise of public relations as a guide to the PR work they are doing for you. For that matter, what do you think about these two sentences? 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 the very people whose behaviors affect the organization the most, the public relations mission is accomplished.

The nice thing about that premise is that it shines the PR spotlight directly on those outside groups of people with a large say about how successful you're going to be – namely, on your key external target audiences.

Then ask your PR team how they feel about using these tools to capture the perceptions, and thus behaviors of your most important outside audiences.

For example, do you and your PR people really know how

your organization is perceived by those target audiences, and are you all really aware of the behaviors that flow from those perceptions?

Because that's where the rubber meets the road – target audience behaviors that help or hinder you in achieving your operating objectives.

To find out what target audience members think about your organization, you and your PR team must interact with them and ask a lot of questions. The alternative is to spend considerable money on professional survey work, but let's assume that's not really an alternative at this point in the budget cycle.

At any rate, we're talking about questions like "What do you think of us? Have you had dealings with us? Were they satisfactory?" Stay alert to negativities such as misconceptions, inaccuracies, false assumptions and rumors.

With such data in hand, you're ready to establish your public relations goal. Often, it can be expressed in a few words: clear up that misconception, correct that inaccuracy, or clarify that false assumption.

But no PR goal is ready for battle without a sound strategy to tell you how to reach it. In matters dealing with perception and opinion, there are just three strategies from which to choose: reinforce existing perception, create perception where there is none, or change it. A word here, make certain the strategy you choose is a good fit with your public relations goal.

Clearly, the most challenging aspect of the PR problem-solving sequence is preparing the message that will do the heavy lifting – altering individual perception within your target audience population. It can do so only if it's both persuasive and compelling. As the PR team's "client manager," you must also be involved in message preparation. Is it clear as to what perception needs to be altered, and is your rationale believable and persuasive?

Next, hitch up your "beasts of burden," the communications tactics you need to carry that message to the eyes and ears of your key target audience. Fortunately, you and your PR team have a long list of such tactics available ranging from press releases, media briefings, newsletters and facility tours to radio and newspaper interviews, brochures and face-to-face meetings. Just be sure that the tactics chosen have a record of actually reaching folks like those in your target audience, and that the budget can accommodate the type and frequency of communications tactics required to do the job.

Pretty quick-like, you will wonder just how much progress towards your public relations goal you are really making. Which is the signal to re-monitor perceptions of those members of

your target audience. Same questions, but a new objective: watch closely for signs that perceptions are actually being altered.

You can always apply more pressure to the effort by adding new communications tactics to the battle, AND bumping up some of their frequencies.

By keeping a managerial eye on your public relations program – and satisfying yourself that it is focused on helping you achieve your operating objectives – you can be certain your PR dollars are being spent on that workable, comprehensive plan for producing those key audience behaviors that impact your operation the most.

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Bob Kelly counsels, writes and speaks to business, non-profit and association managers about using the fundamental premise of public relations to achieve their operating objectives. 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.
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