

PR Buyers Beware!

By Robert A. Kelly

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It can bite you and waste your public relations budget when the program emphasizes communications tactics instead of how to make certain your key outside audiences understand who and what you are.

Especially sad when tactics are placed in motion before you really know how your key target audience views your organization, and exactly at whom those tactics should be directed. Things can really fall apart if you then fail to decide up front what changes in perceptions, and thus behaviors you desire at the end of the program.

That's no way to structure a public relations program.

Instead, before pulling any triggers, ask one big question. Who is my #1 public relations target? Focus on that certain outside audience that you know affects your organization more than any other. It makes sense because that particular external "public" probably will have a big say about the survival of your organization.

Keep in mind that your other external audiences will need similar care and feeding as you move forward.

So, with your target in sight, you need to interact with members of that key audience and get inside their heads. What, if anything, do they think about you and your organization? As you talk to them, do negative feelings or observations come to the surface? Why? What appears to need correction? Are there inaccuracies? Misconceptions? For that matter, is there a dangerous rumor loose out there that badly needs neutralizing?

The answers are solid gold because they let you form a public relations goal which, when achieved, corrects what's wrong. Your goal could be to knock down that rumor, clarify that misconception, or correct that inaccuracy.

In setting your goal, stay alert to the fact that altering the perceptions

of that target audience recognizes that perceptions almost always lead to predictable behaviors that can either hurt or help you achieve your objectives.

Now you need a roadmap that tells you how to get to that goal. In other words, a strategy. In dealing with personal opinion, we only have three strategic choices. Create, change or reinforce that perception, i.e., that opinion.

Which of the three strategies you employ is dictated by, and flows naturally from your public relations goal.

Now, the toughest part of the public relations problem solving sequence is formulating what you are going to say to your #1 target audience.

Your message must be very clear as to what needs clarifying, correcting or rebuttal. It should, no, **MUST** be persuasive and believable as well as direct and candid as possible. Make it as compelling as can be. And to help prevent further misunderstanding, give your message draft a trial run before two or three members of your target audience, and adjust as needed.

Here comes the fun part – deciding which communications tactics will best carry that super message of yours to the right eyes and ears among your target audience.

There are scores of such tactics available to you including, for example, newspaper interviews, face-to-face meetings, press releases, special events, speeches and many, many more.

This is where we hear groans when we point out that you must once again monitor what members of your key target audience are perceiving about your organization. The reason, of course, is to determine if your public relations program is making any progress.

Same questions the second time around. But now, you want to see if all those communications tactics succeeded in moving key audience perception in your direction.

If not far enough, you may have to increase the frequency and mix of your tactics. And you may need to take another look at your message reassessing its content for believability and impact.

The test for public relations success will turn on whether you actually altered enough perceptions, and their follow on behaviors, in your direction.

In which case, you will have insured that your most important outside audiences understand who and what you are. And that strongly suggests that your organization is well on its way to

achieving its operating objectives.

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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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