

PR: Behavior Modification Specialist

By Robert A. Kelly

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While awaiting economic recovery, business needs to attract the attention of its most important external audiences in a more targeted and focused way. Primarily to impact the perceptions of those key outsiders so that resulting behaviors help those managers achieve their objectives.

This should be enough reason for recession-weary managers to take a closer look at public relations, America's resident specialists in behavior modification.

The reason public relations finds itself in the behavior business -- and of real use to those recession-jaded managers -- is because it's firmly rooted in the principle that people act on their own perception of the facts. It strives to create, change or reinforce perception/public opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-desired-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization.

It's good news for business managers because, when the behavioral changes become apparent, and meet the program's original behavior modification goal, a public relations effort has succeeded.

Truth is, at any time, when managers start looking for a return on their public relations investment, it's clear as crystal that their goal **MUST** be the kind of change in the behaviors of key stakeholders that leads right to achieving their objectives.

Just think about some of the perceptions out there, in good times or bad, that could actually hurt your organization. Perceptions that, if ignored long enough, could well result in behaviors that run counter to those you want.

At the root of it all, is that simple truism we all know but tend to forget: people really **DO** act on their perception of

the facts and behave accordingly. But, if a manager is to have an effect on those perceptions and behaviors, he/she must deal with them promptly and effectively whether the economy is down or up.

Imagine how many different audiences your organization may have to depend upon at one time or another? Would your list include insurance carriers, journalists, minorities, customers, prospects, employees, legislators, community residents and others whose perceptions of your organization, if left unattended, could hurt?

Start getting your arms around this challenge by listing your important audiences in priority order. For example, customers, prospects, employees, local and trade media, local business and community leaders, and so forth.

As time permits, meet with members of each audience and jot down their impressions of your business, especially problem areas. Be sure to ask questions about their feelings and perceptions of your products and services. Stay alert to inaccuracies, misconceptions or rumors. Here, you'll have a chance to decide to what degree you will try to alter perceptions among each audience. Later, this will become the behavior modification goal against which you will measure progress for each target audience.

Next, prepare persuasive messages that not only provide details about your product and service quality, but address problems that surfaced during your conversations with key audience members. Identify what is really at issue at the moment; impart a sense of credibility to your comments; and regularly assess how opinion is currently running among that group, constantly adjusting your message.

Then, consider the most effective means for communicating each message to each audience. This may include simple face-to-face meetings, briefings, news releases, news announcement luncheons, media interviews, facility tours, targeted speeches, a brochure, special events like open houses and awards, and a variety of other communications tactics.

As you look for signs that your aggressive efforts are changing perceptions for the better, especially important in a recession, you should begin to notice increased awareness of your organization, especially progress in the marketplace; increased receptiveness to your messages; a growing public perception of the role your organization plays in its industry and in the community; and, of course, growing numbers of prospects.

These signs of progress are tracked by speaking once again, and on a regular basis with people among each of your key

audiences, by monitoring print and broadcast media for mentions of your messages or viewpoints, by interaction with key customers and prospects and, if resources permit, modest opinion sampling.

Especially during hard times, remember that people in your community or marketing area behave like everyone else – they take actions based on their perception of the facts they hear about you and your business.

Which means that you must deal promptly and effectively with those perceptions by doing what is necessary to reach them. Especially during recession, you must persuade your stakeholders to your way of thinking, thus moving them to take actions that lead to the success of your organization.

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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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