

PR: How Sweet It Is!

By Robert A. Kelly

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Robert A. Kelly
bobbkelly@TNI.net

PRCommentary.com LLC <http://www.prcommentary.com>

The public relations goal and strategy make sense; the message is persuasive and compelling; the communications tactics are aggressive and well-targeted. YES!!

For those of us in public relations, how sweet it is when members of an important target audience appear to understand why the rumor was wrong and what they believed about the organization is simply not true.

While that happy result can be yours, including the inevitable improvements in behavior, it doesn't just happen. And especially before somebody in the organization even recognizes the importance of doing something about what those key audiences think about you.

When that epiphany does occur, it's usually because target audience perceptions have led to behaviors that just hurt too much.

Why wait? Get hold of your target audiences now before they do damage and possibly affect the survival of your organization.

And I'm talking about damage such as prospects who decide not to do anything with you; existing customers who stop doing business with you, or community leaders who lose faith in your organization's value to their constituents.

It's not worth it to ignore beginning an aggressive public relations effort a minute longer.

Start by listing those two or three outside audiences whose behaviors can ruin your day. Let's take the one at the top of the list and see how we can get organized to change the perceptions of members of that group and, thus, their

behaviors.

Can't look to improve perceptions if you don't know how key audience members currently view you and your organization. Get out there and interact with them. Ask questions like "What do you think about our organization?" You must stay alert to factual errors in their responses as well as inaccuracies that need to be corrected. And don't overlook misconceptions or rumors that are just plain wrong.

Now you're in position to set a corrective public relations goal. And make sure it zeros in on a specific problem. For example, shoot down that rumor. Or clarify that misconception. Or correct that inaccuracy.

Here, you come to three forks in the road to a workable strategy that will show you how to get to your public relations goal. When it comes to altering opinion (perceptions), you have just three options available to you: create opinion where there may be none; change existing opinion, or reinforce it.

Pick one that obviously is required by the public relations goal you selected.

Now we come to real work, preparing the persuasive and compelling message you need to alter perceptions, and thus behaviors in your direction. For example, if members of your target audience are persuaded that you in fact offer quality service instead of the inferior service they believe you provide, their behaviors will signal change when they begin doing business with you again.

But your message must not only be persuasive and compelling, it must be easily understood, completely factual and, of course, truthful in all details. That's the only way your message will be believable enough to alter perceptions.

Is there a difference of opinion about how to get your message to the eyes and ears of members of your key target audience? Not really because there are so many communications tactic "foot soldiers" available to carry that message for you. They range from fraternal club speeches, newspaper and radio interviews and awards ceremonies to brochures, face-to-face meetings, plain old emails and dozens of others.

Once you fire the communications tactics gun, and give it several weeks to sink in, you must return to monitoring what members of your key target audience are NOW thinking about you. And that means more questions.

If you fail to do so, you will never know for certain if your public relations effort is making any progress.

You should use the same questions as you did for your first information gathering session. The difference now is your objective: have perceptions been altered in your direction because, if so, a change in behavior cannot be far behind?

And so, your public relations goal and strategy will make sense; your message will be persuasive and compelling, and your communications tactics will be aggressive and well-targeted.

A sure path to public relations success.

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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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