

PR: Let's Talk Fundamentals

By Robert A. Kelly

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How much more fundamental can you get than this? As a business, non-profit or association manager, if you don't get your most important outside audiences on your side, you will fail.

To me, failure means key target audiences that don't behave as you want them to. For example, capital donors or specifying sources who look the other way, customers who fail to make repeat purchases, community leaders working closely with your competitors, prospects still doing business with others, organizations looking elsewhere to propose new strategic alliances and joint ventures, and even legislators and political leaders overlooking you as a key member of the non-profit, association or business communities.

All that can change in a New York minute when you base a public relations effort on this simple premise: 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 those people whose behaviors affect the organization, the public relations mission is accomplished.

The primary benefit of that premise to you as a business, non-profit or association manager is the kind of key stakeholder behavior change that leads directly to achieving your objectives.

And that's very doable. Especially when you take the time to list your most important external audiences, then prioritize them according to the impacts they have on your organization.

The real key to success using this premise is actually gathering information as to how members of your key, external audience perceive your organization.

If you have the resources available and can afford professional survey help, fine. If, however, like most of us you don't, the best alternative is for you or your colleagues to begin interacting with audience members. Ask many questions starting with, "Have you heard of us? What do you think of us, if at all? Have you ever done business with us? Why do you feel the way you do?"

Listen carefully for signs of negativity, and watch for untruths, false assumptions, inaccuracies, misconceptions or flagrant rumors.

Obviously, the data you gather from this monitoring activity form the basis of your public relations goal. For example, correct that untruth or inaccuracy, clear up that misconception, or spike that rumor.

Now here, you encounter three forks in the road.

You need a strategy to show you how to get where you need to go. But only three choices are available to you when dealing with matters of perception and opinion: create perception where there may be none, change existing perception, or reinforce it. And make certain the strategy option you choose flows naturally from your new public relations goal.

It's writing time – hard work preparing the actual message designed to alter people's perceptions leading, hopefully, to the behaviors you need to help achieve your objectives.

The corrective message is crucial. It must be clear about just what perception needs clarifying, and why. Your facts, of course, must be truthful, logical and believable in order to be persuasive. And the tone of the message should be compelling if it is to command attention and alter perception.

Next step is easy. Pick your "beasts of burden," the communications tactics you will use to carry that brand new, corrective message to members of your target audience.

You have a very long list of such tactics at your disposal. The only caveat is, make sure each one shows a proven record for reaching people like those who make up your specific target audience.

Tactics range from electronic magazines (called eZines!), speeches, brochures and emails to radio/newspaper interviews, press releases, newsletters, facility tours and

so many more.

Shortly, you will start to wonder if you are making any progress. And that means a second round of Q&A with members of your target audience. Same questions as before, by the way, only now your focus is on signs that their perception has been altered to reflect that described in your carefully prepared message.

You can always speed up the effort by introducing new communications tactics, and by increasing their frequencies. Also, not a bad idea to check that message of yours one more time for both factual accuracy, and for how successful it was at actually impacting opinion.

Clearly, as a business, non-profit or association manager, you benefit most when your public relations program succeeds in creating the kind of key stakeholder behavior change that leads directly to achieving your objectives.

end

Bob Kelly counsels, writes and speaks to business, non-profit and association managers 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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