

PR: Ouch! Tells the Tale

By Robert A. Kelly

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Ever get the feeling that your public relations program isn't doing much about the behaviors of your important outside audiences? Those audiences whose actions have the greatest impacts on your business?

Chances are your PR effort is focused primarily on communications tactics and not on the process needed to really move those key audience perceptions, and thus behaviors in your direction.

Which means you've missed out on the sweet spot of public relations.

Ouch!

That sweet spot can be summed up in just 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 those people whose behaviors affect the organization, the public relations mission is accomplished.

Now there's nothing wrong with communications tactics. They are necessary "beasts of burden" that fit in nicely at the proper time, as you will shortly note.

So, if you believe it finally may be time to utilize that PR sweet spot, you could start this way.

Just who are your most important outside audiences? Customers and prospects, of course. But what about employees, minorities, residents, political and labor union leaders, the trade and business communities, among others?

Rank them in order of importance to your operation and let's work on your #1 external target audience.

Nothing can happen until you know what members of that audience think about your organization. And that means interacting with them while asking lots of probing questions and monitoring their perceptions. Have they heard about your company, its products or services? What do they think about them? Do you detect negativity, inaccuracies, misconceptions or even disturbing rumors?

With that kind of information, you're ready to set down your corrective public relations goal. Examples might be to counter that rumor with the truth, or correct an inaccurate belief, or clarify a hurtful misconception.

Now, you need the right strategy, one that gets you from here to your goal. Happily, there are only three strategies you can use in dealing with an opinion challenge like this: create perception (opinion) where there may be none, change existing perception, or reinforce it. Your goal will lead you to the correct strategy choice.

It's time to put on your writer's hat and prepare a really responsive message for delivery to the target audience. Above all, you must be convincing when you state that the unfortunate misconception, inaccuracy or rumor is untrue, and then lay out that truth creditably. Strive for clarity, persuasiveness, believability and, if at all possible, a compelling tone.

Your "beasts of burden" are standing by patiently ready to carry your message to the attention of your target audience. Because there are so many such tactics, you must choose carefully, and check just as carefully that each tactic has a proven record for reaching people like those who make up your target audience. Tactics range from radio and newspaper interviews, newsletters and press releases to emails, op-eds, speeches and many, many others.

What about progress? Are you making any? Best way to find out is to re-monitor perceptions/opinion in that target audience now that your communications tactics have been underway for six to eight weeks. Interact again with target audience members using the same questions you used the first time around. What you want to see are perceptions beginning to reflect the corrections in the message carried by your communications tactics. In other words, you are looking for opinion/perceptions that have been altered in your direction.

Talk about early-warning systems! When you pay attention regularly to your most important external audiences, you will be continuously aware that certain behaviors may be getting ready to exert negative pressure on your business. Which gives

you time to spersuade the stakeholders who make up that target audience 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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