

Planning for 2002 Business Recovery? Use Public Relations

Firepower

By Robert A. Kelly

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Who wants to face the challenges of Business Recovery 2002 without this kind of firepower? Especially when getting your piece of the expected economic recovery this year will almost certainly depend upon how well you modify the behaviors of your target audiences.

That's why public relations should play a central role in your business planning in 2002.

Any recovery that takes place this year will be the result of industrial, commercial and individual consumers alike starting to behave like buyers, whether of luxury real estate, frozen pizzas, industrial transformers, or running shoes.

So, before this train leaves the station, any manager unsure how best to use public relations in the upcoming business recovery is hereby advised that changed key-audience perceptions, much stronger confidence levels and clearly modified behaviors will be essential to business expansion as never before. Fortunately, all three are social dynamics at which public relations excels.

Consider its basic mission: Public relations is firmly rooted in the principle that people act on their own perception of the facts. Then it strives to create, change or reinforce public opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to- action those people whose behaviors affect the organization. When the behavioral changes become apparent, and meet the

program's original behavior modification goal, a public relations venture can be deemed a success.

So, what comes first? In my opinion, a real acceptance that (1) individual perception of the facts is THE guiding light leading to behavioral change, and (2) that something really CAN be done about those perceptions. Think about that for a moment – not every one buys it. For me, I can tell you it was an epiphany of immense proportion that actually helped shape my career in public relations.

Next, What Will it Be? Opinion Creation, Change or Reinforcement?

CREATION

O.K., now the real public opinion work begins. The public relations squad must decide whether opinion among key audiences is to be created from scratch, requiring a lot of basic data, information and interpretation from which a person can form an initial opinion.

CHANGE

Or, are we talking about a change in opinion, a nudge in one direction or the other requiring a clear, credible and well-supported explanation of, and rationale for why anyone should alter their current views?

REINFORCEMENT

Or, do we simply reinforce opinion that pretty much tracks with the opinion level we desire? Here, we use simple corroboration and additional third-party support to strengthen existing public opinion.

But for each of the three choices, the information and data to be communicated must be creditably sourced, crystal-clear and logically presented.

On to Reach, Persuade and Move-to-Action

REACH

Now, reach your key audiences, people whose behaviors will affect your organization. Among others, these stakeholders include customers, employees, prospects, retirees, media, legislators, regulators, and both financial and plant communities.

But reaching these target groups means applying the most effective communications tactics available to you. These will include such tools as media relations and publicity-

generating news conferences and press releases, newsletters and e-mails, high-profile speeches, charitable contributions, investor relations, informal opinion surveys and many others.

Special events also will be high on the “reach” action list: newsworthy events like trade shows, open houses, awards ceremonies, contests, VIP receptions, financial roadshows, and even media-attracting stunts. At the same time, marketing counsel will want to develop sales-oriented communications to help build brand franchise, win consumer acceptance and gain competitive advantage.

PERSUADE

Persuading your key audiences, the third leg of the opinion troika, is yet another challenge because bringing these important groups of stakeholders around to your way of thinking depends heavily on the quality of the message you prepare for each target audience.

It's hard work. You must understand and identify what is really at issue at the moment; impart a sense of credibility to your comments; perform regular assessments of how opinion is currently running among that group, constantly adjusting your message; as well as highlighting those key issue points most likely to engage their attention and involvement; and finally, identify and build into your messages pre-tested, action-producing incentives for individuals to take the actions you desire.

By the way, those incentives could include the very strength of your position on the issues, a new plant expansion holding the promise of more jobs and taxes for the City, or even your organization's efforts to attract low and middle income housing to the area.

ACTION

Moving your target groups to action, hopefully with a mix of activity such as the above, can be accelerated, even amplified by careful selection of those media most likely to reach your target audience. This applies whether, among other tactics, you use print or broadcast media, key podium presentations or a series of top-level personal contacts, because when these tools communicate with your target audiences you want them to score direct bullseyes.

Of equal importance to the success of your action program will be the selection and perceived credibility of the actual spokespeople who will deliver your messages. They must be seen as people of stature, and they must speak with authority, personal confidence and conviction if meaningful media coverage is to be achieved.

Now, Let's Gain and Hold

By this time, your action program should begin to gain and hold the kind of public understanding and acceptance that will lead to the desired shift in public behavior.

Signs that your messages are turning some opinion in your direction will begin to appear. For example, indicators like comments by a colleague in an outside business meeting, observations in a local newspaper editorial, e-mails from interested parties, public references by political figures and local celebrities should begin to build. Each of these indicators will reflect a segment of local, individual perception which, in turn, will gradually begin to reflect the modified behaviors you seek.

And The End-Game? Modify Behavior, Achieve your Goal

When the changes in behaviors become truly apparent through media reports, thought-leader comment, employee and community chatter and a variety of other feedback -- at the same time clearly meeting your original behavior modification goal -- I believe your public relations program can be deemed a success.

Obviously, your piece of the action in the business recovery ahead will come at a price. And that will be your cost to efficiently modify the behaviors of your target audiences. But, the payoff makes it all worthwhile -- nothing less than the achievement of your business objectives and, at slight risk of overstatement, a real contribution to the survival of your organization.

end

Bob Kelly, public relations consultant, was director of public relations for Pepsi-Cola Co.; AGM-Public Relations, Texaco Inc.; VP-Public Relations, Olin Corp.; VP-Public Relations, 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](mailto:bobkelly@TNI.net)

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