

# Public Relations Going O.K.?

By Robert A. Kelly

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none  
none

Yes?

Good!

Still, if you're not getting the behavior changes you paid for, you're wasting your money.

Here's why I say that. People act on their perception of the facts, and those perceptions lead to certain behaviors. But something can be done about those perceptions and behaviors that leads to achieving your organization's objectives.

Which means you really CAN establish the behavior change you want, up front, then insist on getting that result before you pronounce the public relations effort a success.

In other words, the way to increase your comfort level about your public relations investment, is to make certain that investment produces the behavior modification you said you wanted at the beginning of the program.

That way, you KNOW you're getting your money's worth.

Just what, you may ask, does your public relations team have to do to achieve that result?

Here's one approach.

Because public relations problems are usually defined by what people THINK about a set of facts, as opposed to the actual truth of the matter, it will be especially helpful if the public relations program is built upon the premise mentioned above and, for emphasis, again here:

1. People act on their perception of the facts;

2. Those perceptions lead to certain behaviors;
3. Something can be done about those perceptions and behaviors that leads to achieving the organization's objectives.

## Now, Rank Your External Audiences

Identifying key audiences and prioritizing them – a crucial step in any public relations action plan -- starts with a priority-ranking of those audiences with a clear interest in your organization, often described as “stakeholders” or “publics.” Included would be customers, prospects, employees, media, the business community and local thought-leaders as well as any number of other interest groups.

## Stay Aware

Those with the public relations assignment must stay aware of negative or counterproductive behaviors among the organization's key stakeholders or “publics.” – customers, prospects, media, community activists, union leaders, competitors the business community and others.

Interaction of one kind or another with key audiences will tell you how they feel – and how they perceive -- your organization, and in particular areas where problems may be brewing. This is informal polling, but essential to any public relations effort. If resources are available, a limited opinion poll of the priority audience would be helpful.

There are many ways to gather such information. For example, regular monitoring of headquarters and field location media, staff activity reports, employee and community feedback, regulatory and other local, state and federal government activities involving your organization. High on any such intelligence list is the Internet with its emails, ezines, chatrooms and search engines.

## Identify the Behavior Modification Problem or Challenge

Now is the time to identify the behavior modification problem such as declining sales in a specific product line. Or, is it an allegation of wrongdoing? Or a quality or performance issue? Has an elected official spoken negatively about your industry? Have you learned that a national activist group may target a unit of your organization? Or, is there clear evidence of negative behavior among a key audience?

Similarly, a behavior modification challenge might include creating positive, first time impressions of a new soft drink during a new market introduction. Or reinforcing the reputation of a category leader whose sales have begun to slip.

## Verify the Accuracy and Severity of the Problem

Is it true and how bad is it? Determine through field staff, key customers, media monitoring and, if the budget is there, opinion sampling, just how serious the problem is. If an allegation, is it true or false? If a drop-off in sales, gather and carefully evaluate the likely reasons. If a quality issue, probe deeply for its real cause.

After an exhaustive review of all evidence surrounding the behavioral problem, establish conclusively its size and shape. Does it threaten employee or public safety, financial stability, reputation, the organization's mission, or sales? The answers to these questions help determine the resources to be assembled.

## The Public Relations Goal

Simply stated: the goal is to begin the process of altering public perception and, thus, behaviors, to a view consistent with that held by your organization.

## The Public Relations Strategy

Now, you must select one of three choices available to you when you determine the public relations strategy. You can create opinion where none exists, change existing opinion or reinforce existing opinion.

Let's assume that we will strive to change existing opinion on the key issue. With your perception, behavior modification goals and now, the strategy, established, progress will be measured in terms of specific altered behaviors, i.e., floor traffic returns to the showroom; activist rhetoric declines; a low employee retention rate reverses. Such progress indicators can be set down, and agreed upon, once the negative perceptions are truly understood, thus establishing the degree of behavioral change that realistically can be expected.

## A Persuasive message

What do we say? Well, we prepare persuasive messages designed to inform, clarify, and impact individual perception in such a way that individual behaviors flowing from those perceptions are consistent with that desired by our organization. Bringing important target audiences around to one's way of thinking really does depend heavily on the quality of the message prepared.

The messages must contain clear evidence supporting your organization's views on the issue such as a credible

third-party endorsement of your position. Regular assessments of how opinion is currently running among employees, suppliers and community leaders should be made. Finally, action-producing incentives leading individuals to change their perceptions of the issue, thus altering their behaviors, should be included in the message – incentives that testify to the organization's good intentions and veracity.

### It's Tactics Time

Now, you select the most effective communications tactics available to you.

The question is, how will you reach your target audiences – especially in various locations? You have many choices. Face-to-face meetings, email, hand-placed feature articles and broadcast appearances, special employee, supplier or community briefings, news releases, announcement luncheons, onsite media interviews, facility tours, promotional contests, brochures and a host of other carefully targeted communications tactics.

Reaching such audiences with the message through special events is particularly effective. They offer news value and include activities such as financial roadshows, awards ceremonies, celebrity appearances, open houses and trade conventions.

Your public relations effort can be accelerated, even amplified by carefully selecting the very best tactics from among print or broadcast media, key podium presentations, special events or top-level personal contacts. When these tools communicate with each target audience, they must score direct bullseyes.

And remember that vital to the success of any action program is the selection and perceived credibility of the actual spokespeople who deliver the messages. They must speak with authority and conviction if they are to be believed, and if meaningful media coverage is to be achieved.

### Action

While it's pull-the-trigger time, you should insure that you approach your target audiences with a tactical schedule calculated to reach them consistently as well as through varied media such as newspapers, radio and television appearances, high-profile speeches, facility tours and community briefings.

### How are we Doing?

The key activity here is monitoring progress, seeking signs

of improvement in target audience perceptions and behaviors.

You and your colleagues should speak regularly with members of each target audience, monitor print and broadcast media for clear evidence of the organization's messages or viewpoints and regularly interact with key customers, prospects and influential citizens.

Indicators that the messages are moving community opinion – read perceptions and behaviors -- in your organization's direction will start appearing. For example, indicators like comments in community meetings, local newspaper editorials, e-mails from suppliers as well as public references by political figures and local celebrities.

### The End Game

You'll know when you arrive at the public relations end game because the changes in behaviors will become truly apparent -- among them, encouraging supplier and thought-leader comment, increasingly upbeat employee and community feedback and an increased pace of positive media reports.

Bottom line? The public relations program can be deemed a success when you clearly meet the original behavior modification goal set when it all began

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>

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