

# Public Relations: A Natural Phenomenon

By Robert A. Kelly

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What else do you call a human discipline whose very nature is firmly rooted in the principle that people act on their own perception of the facts, then creates, changes or reinforces public opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-action the very people whose behaviors affect the organization?

I call it public relations, and clearly a natural phenomenon.

In fact, I believe it is the fundamental premise of public relations. Especially when it deals with the sheer survival of the organization by successfully altering the perceptions and, hence, the behaviors of certain groups of people important to the success of that organization.

Because public relations problems are usually defined by what people THINK about a set of facts, versus the truth of the matter, we are well-advised to focus on that fundamental premise.

Does it become any less of a phenomenon as it works its magic in the real world?

No. Instead, it is the degree of human behavioral change it produces – through quality planning – that defines the success or failure of a public relations program.

In my experience, there is broad agreement that people really do act on THEIR perception of the facts, and that how they react to those facts actually does affect their behaviors. So, to me, it follows that individual understanding of those facts must be continually informed if the follow-on behaviors are to help achieve the organization's goal and objectives.

In the end, a sound public relations strategy combined with effective communications tactics leads directly to the

bottom line – perceptions altered, behaviors modified, client/employer satisfied. In other words, when those changes in perception and behaviors clearly meet the original behavior modification goal set at the beginning of the program, the public relations effort is successful.

So, what comes first? I believe acceptance that individual perception of the facts is the guiding light leading to behavioral change, and that something can be done about those perceptions. While not everyone buys that, I must say that it actually helped shape my career in public relations.

I asked myself some time ago, why am I working in public relations anyway? The answers only strengthened my conviction.

Was it to create major publicity for my employer or client? Often yes, but I realized that it was only an interim step designed to alter target audience perceptions and behaviors. The same response applied to every tactic from creating newsworthy special events, effective response to crises and controversial public issues to managing investor relations or major speech appearances.

Yes, such tactics are vital cogs in the public relations problem solving sequence but, again, only as interim steps designed to alter target audience perceptions and behaviors.

Fact is, NO organization – business, non-profit or public sector – can succeed today unless the behaviors of its most important audiences are in-sync with the organization's objectives. And that means public relations professionals must modify somebody's behavior if they are to help hit the employer/client's objective and earn a paycheck. All else are but means to that end.

Once public relations' natural phenomenon characteristics are understood, an action pathway begins to appear:

- identify the problem
- identify target audiences
- set the public relations goal
- set the public relations strategy
- prepare persuasive messages
- select and implement key communications tactics
- monitor progress
- and the end-game? Meet the behavior modification goal

And we get a bonus because we're using a near-perfect public relations performance standard. I mean, how can you measure the results of an activity more accurately than when you clearly achieve the goal you set at the beginning of that

activity? You can't. It's pure success.

Of course, as we develop those interim tactical activities, we'll be nurturing the relationships between our target audiences and our employer/client's business by burnishing the reputation of the organization, its service and products. We will do our best to persuade those target audiences to do what our employer/client wants them to do. And while seeking public understanding and acceptance of that employer/client, we'll insure that our joint activities not only comply with the law, but clearly serve the public interest. Then, we will pull out all tactical stops to actually move those individuals to action. And our employer/client will be pleased that we have brought matters along to this point.

But when will that employer/client of ours be fully satisfied with the public relations results we have produced? Only when our "reach, persuade and move-to-action" efforts have produced the desired, visible modification in the behaviors of those target audiences we, and they wish to influence.

In my view, this is the fundamental premise of a natural phenomenon called public relations, and the strategic context in which we must operate.

end

Bob Kelly, public relations counselor, 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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