

Public Relations: Converting the Non-Believers

By Robert A. Kelly

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What's the real reason some managers shy away from public relations? I believe it's because they don't understand, or believe, the direct connection between what public relations is capable of delivering and their need to achieve specific business objectives.

It's lost opportunity of the worst kind. And a shame, because the reason we do public relations in the first place is to change the behaviors of certain groups of people important to the success of those very Doubting Thomas managers.

First, I would say to them, surely, it's not that difficult a concept to understand or accept. People act on their perception of the facts; those perceptions lead to certain behaviors; and something can be done about those perceptions and behaviors that leads to achieving your organization's objectives.

Better yet, you can establish the degree of behavior change you want, up front, then insist on getting that result before you pronounce the public relations effort a success.

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

Here's another approach. 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 when you meet that goal.

Public relations is no different. The client/employer wants our help in altering counterproductive perceptions among key audiences which almost always change behaviors in a way that helps him or her get to where they want to be.

But, as Doubting Thomases you might ask, are we really qualified to do that job?

I think yes, because everything we do is based on the same realities -- people act on their perception of the facts, and we can do something about those perceptions. And when public relations activity successfully creates, changes or reinforces that opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization, the public relations effort is a success.

It works this way in practice.

- o you may wish to encourage a certain audience to sample your soft drink brand's great taste and refreshing flavor, in the process creating perceptions of value, then new sales.
- o or you may want people to perceive your organization more positively, thus strengthening its reputation.
- o it could be as simple as communicating a company's strengths to a target audience leading them to a positive perception of the firm, in turn leading to new investments in the company's shares.

I know, Mr. or Ms. Manager, that you are not primarily interested in our ability to communicate, paint images or schmooz with the media. Nor are you especially fascinated with our efforts to identify target audiences, set public relations goals and strategies, write persuasive messages and select communications tactics.

What I believe you DO want is a change in the behaviors of certain key audiences leading directly to the achievement of your business objectives.

Which is why we continually stress that quality planning, and the degree of behavioral change it produces, defines the success or failure of a public relations program.

Done correctly, when public relations results in modified behaviors among groups of people important to an organization, we could be talking about nothing less than its survival.

So, for your organization, Ms. Manager, that means public relations professionals must modify somebody's behavior if they are to help hit your objective and earn a paycheck – I believe everything else is a means to that end.

O.K., Mr. Manager, let's look at how public relations might work for you out on the ground. We'll use the example of a national marketer of furniture imported from the Far East. First, we identify the key operating problem to be addressed. Let's say we receive news reports and other input, amplified by competitive trouble-making out in the trade, about rumors circulating to the effect that serious quality problems have

cropped up in the company's factories in Southeast Asia.

Here, we verify whether the allegation is true or false.

So, because the company's sales have leveled off and are starting to decline, public relations counsel and staff, working closely with the company's manufacturing people here and abroad, establish conclusively that rumors of declining quality are without foundation, and simply untrue.

But, even though the rumors are not true, we still want to verify the status of both consumer and trade PERCEPTIONS of the company's product quality.

But, surprise! Probing consumer opinion through personal contact and informal polling out in the market place, counsel and staff determine that, in fact, there really IS a disturbing perception out there that the company's furniture line is "of low quality and overpriced."

It's useful to make the point here, Ms. Manager, that public relations problems are nearly always defined by what people think about the facts, as opposed to the actual truth of the matter.

Moving on, we establish the public relations goal: alter the public perception of the company's furniture quality. This will lead to positive consumer behavioral changes, in turn resulting in furniture buyers returning to company showrooms once again.

Now we determine the public relations strategy. We only have three choices: CREATE opinion where none exists, CHANGE existing opinion, or REINFORCE that existing opinion. Because existing opinion has turned negative on the quality of the company's furniture, the public relations strategy will be to begin the process of CHANGING that opinion from negative to positive.

Here, we identify key audiences. In this case, at the top of the list is the furniture-buying public – customers and prospects – as well as the trade and business communities, employees, local thought-leaders and media in the company's retail outlet locations, and a number of other possible stakeholder groups.

Now, Ms. and Mr. Manager, we begin preparation of what we hope will be persuasive messages for communication to our target audiences.

It's a challenge. The messages must disarm the rumors circulating in the furniture community with clear evidence of excellent design and construction quality, and seconded by credible third-party endorsements such as satisfied

customers and top design consultants.

Regular assessments of how opinion is currently running among target groups must be performed, constantly tweaking the message and, finally, action-producing incentives for individuals to take the desired actions must be identified and built into each message.

Those incentives might include the very strength of the company's forthright position on the quality issue, high-credibility designer endorsements, plans for expansion that hold the promise of more jobs and taxes, or even the sponsorship of a new cable TV furniture design show.

So, how will target audiences in the various company locations actually be reached, Mr. Manager Thomas? Among a wide variety of available communications tactics, choices include face-to-face meetings, Internet ezines and email, hand-placed newspaper and magazine feature articles and broadcast appearances, special consumer briefings, news releases, announcement luncheons, onsite media interviews, facility tours, brochures and promotional contests.

Now, it's time to monitor progress and look for signs of improvement. Public relations staff and counsel must speak regularly with members of each target audience, monitor print and broadcast media for evidence of the company's messages or viewpoints, and interact with key customers, prospects and influentials.

At last, indicators that the messages are moving opinion in your direction will start appearing. Indicators like comments in community business meetings, mentions in research analyst's reports, local newspaper editorials, e-mails from members of target audiences as well as public references by political figures and local celebrities.

What is happening, is that the action program is beginning to gain and hold the kind of public understanding and acceptance that will lead to the desired shift in public behavior.

And the end-game for this example of public relations in action?

When the changes in behaviors become truly apparent through increased showroom traffic, media reports, thought-leader comment, employee and community chatter and a variety of other feedback – in other words, clearly meeting the original behavior modification goal – two things have occurred. One, the public relations program is a success and, two, by achieving the behavioral goal you set at the beginning, you are using a near-perfect public relations performance measurement.

To assess behavior changes and, thus, the degree of success the public relations program has achieved, we need evidence of changes in behavior showing up as follows: Internet chatter and in print and broadcast news coverage, letters-to-the-editor, consumer and customer reactions, shareholder letters, comments from community leaders, informal polls of employees, retirees, industrial neighbors and local businesses, feedback from suppliers as well as reaction from elected officials, union leaders and government agencies.

But, we can't let the Doubting Thomases off the hook without reminders that some very basic but unattended perceptions may be out there that could lead to very costly negative behaviors. For example, Mr. Manager:

- 0 if sales prospects are unaware of your product or service, you will not get them as customers.
- 0 if your customers don't remain convinced of the value of your product or service, you lose them.
- 0 and if employees believe you don't care about them, productivity suffers.

And on and on when still more audiences like citizens, journalists, regulators, investors and legislators don't believe you.

In the end, a sound strategy combined with effective tactics leads directly to the bottom line – altered perceptions, modified behaviors, a happy CEO and a public relations home run.

So, Mr. and Ms. Manager Thomas, what do I believe you want from us? I believe you want us to apply our special skills in a way that helps you achieve your business objectives. But no matter what strategic plan we create to solve a problem, no matter what tactical program we put in place, at the end of the day we must modify somebody's behavior for you if we are to earn our money.

Which is why I say that when you measure our real effectiveness, you will be fully satisfied with those public relations results only when our "reach, persuade and move-to-action" efforts produce that visible modification in the behaviors of those people you wish to influence. In my view, this is the central, strategic function of public relations – the basic context in which we must operate.

Doubting Thomases aside, I hope these remarks contain a nugget or two that assists you in leading the non-believers in your organizations to a better understanding of the function of public relations. Especially how it can strengthen relationships with those important groups of people – those

target audiences whose perceptions and behaviors can help or hinder the achievement of their business objectives.

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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