

# Public Relations: Get Started Right

By Robert A. Kelly

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For young people who have decided that a career in public relations will be their Latte Grande in life, here are four situations in which you do not want to find yourself:

1. You confuse the basic function of public relations with sub-parts that make up the whole like publicity, crisis management or employee communications.
2. You feel unsure in approaching public relations problems, then uncertain about what counsel to give your employer/client.
3. As the years pass, you rely on career-long misconceptions about public relations but forge ahead anyway advising the employer/client ineffectively sometimes with damaging, if not dangerous counsel.
4. You realize too late that you have gone through your entire career without a firm grasp of what public relations is all about.

You can avoid those pitfalls by grasping early-on The Rosetta Stone of public relations, i.e., a guide to understanding the discipline and its core strength. Namely, 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 lead to achieving an organization's objectives.

Which is why, when public relations goes on to successfully create, change or reinforce public opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization, it accomplishes its mission.

The fact is that 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 that foundation of understanding is firmly set, an action pathway begins to appear:

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

A bonus: you are using a near-perfect public relations performance measurement. 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

So, as a beginner, can you expect to avoid the four pitfalls listed above? Yes, and here's why:

- With proper preparation, you will not confuse action tactics with the basic mission of public relations because you will know precisely what each is and just what fits where in the public relations problem solving sequence.
- You will feel more confident about providing counsel to the employer/client because the public relations problem at hand can be clearly identified allowing you to select solutions that obviously fit into the action sequence outlined above. You will identify your target audiences because you will know exactly who your employer/client wants to reach, and the necessary action tactics will then be self-evident.
- You realize that you have gone through your entire career WITH a firm, successful grasp of what public relations is all about.

Of course, on the way you will also nurture the relationships between your target audiences and your employer/client's business by burnishing the reputation of the organization, its service and products. You will do your best to persuade those target audiences to do what your employer/client wants them to do. And while seeking public understanding and acceptance of that employer/client, you'll insure that your

joint activities not only comply with the law, but clearly serve the public interest. Then, you will pull out all tactical stops to actually move those individuals to action. And your employer/client will be pleased that you have brought matters along to this point.

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

In my view, this is the central, strategic function of public relations – the basic context in which you must operate in your pursuit of a successful and satisfying public relations career.

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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