

Public Relations: The Fundamental Premise

By Robert A. Kelly

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It seems difficult to believe at the dawn of the 21st Century, that there exists a major discipline with so many diverse, partial, incomplete and limited interpretations of its mission. Here, just a sampling of professional opinion on what public relations is all about:

- talking to the media on behalf of a client.
- selling a product, service or idea.
- reputation management.
- engineering of perception
- doing good and getting credit for it.
- attracting credit to an organization for doing good and limiting the downside when it does bad

While there is an element of truth in such definitions, most zero in on only part of what public relations is capable of doing, kind of a halfway fundamental premise. Worse, they fail to answer the question, to what end do they lead? Few even mention the REAL end-game -- behavior modification -- the goal against which all public relations activity must be held accountable.

Here's my opinion about the fundamental premise of public relations: People act on their perception of the facts leading to behaviors about which something can be done. When public relations creates, changes or reinforces that opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-desired-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization, the public relations mission is accomplished.

Even when we feel certain about the fundamental premise of public relations, maybe we should take another look? Because if we are wrong, at best we miss out on public relation's enormous benefits. At worst, we can damage ourselves and our organizations.

The fundamental premise suggests that, to help achieve true competitive advantage, management must insure that its public relations investment is committed directly to influencing the organization's most important audiences. And THEN insure that the tacticians efficiently prepare and communicate messages that will influence those audience perceptions and, thus, behaviors. For non-profits or public sector entities, the emphasis would be on achieving the organization's primary objectives.

What is the alternative when we see some public relations people managing to go through their entire careers without a firm grasp of the fundamental premise of public relations? Their responses to crises, or to requests for well thought-out solutions to public relations problems, reveal a serious

lack of understanding. They confuse the basic function of public relations with any number of tactical parts that make up the whole, such as publicity, crisis management or employee relations. Understandably, they feel unsure in approaching public relations problems, then uncertain about what counsel to give their clients. Many, relying on career-long misconceptions about public relations, forge ahead anyway advising the client ineffectively sometimes with damaging, if not dangerous counsel.

In seeking a solution to this challenge to understanding, we cannot rely solely on tactics or even emulate the artillery training commander who tells his student gunners "point your guns in any direction and fire when you feel like it!"

Instead, just as that artillery commander teaches his newbie gunners to carefully analyze their target and precisely what they must do to reach it, so it is with public relations. Our best opportunity resides at the get-go where we really can make certain our public relations students

CLEARLY understand the basic premise of public relations at the beginning of their careers. AND that they have an equally clear understanding of the organizational context -- business, non-profit or public sector -- in which they will be expected to apply what they have learned, and in which they must operate successfully.

Bushy-tailed and bright with promise, the new generation of public relations professionals must learn that their employer/client wants us to apply our special skills in a way that helps achieve his or her business objectives. And that 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 if we are to earn our money.

The best part is, when the behavioral changes become apparent, and meet the program's original behavior modification goal, three benefits appear.

One, the public relations program is a success. Two, by achieving the behavioral goal we set at the beginning, we are using a dependable and accurate public relations performance measurement. And three, when our "reach, persuade and move-to-desired-action" efforts produce a visible modification in the behaviors of those people we wish to influence, we are using public relations' special strengths to their very best advantage.

Budding professionals should learn at the beginning of their careers that most employers and clients are not primarily interested in our ability to fraternize with the media, communicate or paint images. Nor are they especially fascinated with our efforts to identify target audiences, set public relations goals and strategies, write persuasive messages, select communications tactics, et al.

What the employer/client invariably DOES want is a change in the behaviors of certain key audiences which leads directly to the achievement of their business objectives. Hence, the emphasis in this article on careful planning for altered key audience perceptions and modified behaviors.

Which explains why quality preparation and the degree of behavioral change it produces, defines success or failure for a public relations program. Done correctly, when public relations results in modified behaviors among groups of people vitally important to any organization, we could be talking about nothing less than its survival.

But why, young people, do we feel so strongly about the fundamental premise of public relations? Because some of us have learned from leaders in the field, from mentors and from long years of experience that there are only three ways a public relations effort can impact behavior: create opinion where it doesn't exist, reinforce existing opinion or change that opinion. No surprise that the

process by which those goals are realized is known as public relations. While behavior is the goal, and a host of communications tactics are the tools, our strategy is the leverage provided by public opinion.

We also learned the hard way that when your employer/client starts looking for a return on his or her public relations investment, it becomes clear in a hurry that the goal **MUST** be the kind of change in the behaviors of key stakeholders that leads directly to achieving business objectives.

I also believe that we should advise our newcomers that if their employers/clients ever say they're not getting the behavior changes they paid for, they're probably wasting the money they're spending on public relations.

Here's why I say that. Once again, we know that people act on their perception of the facts, that those perceptions lead to certain behaviors, and that something can be done about those perceptions and behaviors that leads to achieving the employer/client's business objectives.

Which means s/he really **CAN** establish the desired behavior change up front, then insist on getting that result before pronouncing the public relations effort a success.

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

That way, they **KNOW** they're getting their money's worth.

I would be remiss here if I omitted reference to the difficulties those new to the field will encounter in attempting to evaluate public relations performance. Often, they will find themselves using highly-subjective, very limited and only partially applicable performance judgements. Among them, inquiry generation, story content analysis, gross impressions and even advertising value equivalent to the publicity space obtained.

The main reason for this sorry state of affairs is the lack of affordable public opinion survey products that could demonstrate conclusively that the public relations perception and behavioral goal set at the beginning of the program was, in fact, achieved. Usually, opinion surveys adequate to the job of establishing beyond doubt that a behavioral goal was achieved, are cost-prohibitive, often far in excess of the overall cost of the public relations program itself!

However, young people, all is not lost. Obviously, some behavioral changes are immediately visible, such as customers returning to showrooms, environmental activists abandoning plant gate protests or a rapidly improving job retention rate. We follow less obvious behavioral change by monitoring indicators that directly impact behavior such as comments in community meetings and business speeches, local newspaper, radio and TV editorials, emails from target audience members and thought-leaders, and public statements by political figures and local celebrities.

We even shadow our own communications tactics trying to monitor their impact on audience perception -- tactics such as 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 even special events like promotional contests, financial roadshows, awards ceremonies, trade conventions, celebrity appearances and open houses -- each designed to impact individual perception and behavior.

And it does work -- we **ARE** able to demonstrate an impact on perception and behavior for the

employer/client. But affordable professional opinion/behavioral surveys would be the best solution. Clearly, solving this problem remains a major challenge for both the public relations and survey disciplines.

One more piece of advice for the soon-to-be public relations professional. As we begin to achieve proficiency in public relations, an action pathway to success also 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.

I hope these remarks contribute to a broadened understanding of the fundamental function of public relations in our organizations, especially among our entry-level colleagues. In particular, how it can strengthen relationships with those important groups of people -- those target audiences, those "publics" whose perceptions and behaviors can help or hinder the achievement of our employer/client's business objectives.

A final thought for those entering or planning to enter the field of public relations -- you'll know you've arrived at each public relations end game when the changes in behaviors become truly apparent through feedback such as increased numbers of positive media reports, encouraging supplier and thought-leader comment, and increasingly upbeat employee and community chatter.

In other words, sound strategy combined with effective tactics leads directly to the bottom line -- altered perceptions, modified behaviors, and a public relations homerun.

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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