

Public Relations: Toast?

By Robert A. Kelly

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Could be, when unit managers in businesses, non-profits and associations don't get the really important external audience behaviors they need to achieve their department, division or subsidiary objectives.

They're entitled to wonder where their money went when they don't see behaviors like membership applications or capital contributions on the rise; growing numbers of engineering firms specifying their components, prospects newly interested in their products and services, or simply more repeat purchases.

Those behaviors don't just happen. They result from a public relations effort based solidly on a fundamental premise that works. Like this one: People act on their own perception of the facts before them, which leads to predictable behaviors about which something can be done. When we create, change or reinforce that opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-desired-action the very people whose behaviors affect the organization the most, the public relations mission is accomplished.

And then, aggressive implementation.

For example, a comprehensive, workable effort that persuades the stakeholders who make up your target external audience, to your way of thinking, thus moving them to take actions that lead to your success.

Where to start? First, promise yourself that you will stay involved in your public relations program every step of the way.

Working with PR staff or agency assigned to your unit, prepare a list of those outside audiences who behave in ways that help or hinder you in achieving your objectives.

Then decide among yourselves which behaviors are most severe, and place that target audience at the head of your list.

So now, you've identified your number one target and you're ready to go to work. But chances are you and your public relations team don't really know how most members of that target audience actually perceive your organization.

Short of spending significant dollars on professional survey work, you and your colleagues will have to get out there and interact with audience members in order to monitor those perceptions yourself. And that means asking questions like "Do you know who we are? What do you think of us? Are you familiar with our products, or services, or our management? Have you had dealings with us? Do you have any problems with us?"

You need to stay alert during those Q&A encounters for negative responses and even negative tones of voice.

Keep your eyes and ears wide open for evasive or hesitant replies, and especially for untruths, inaccuracies, misconceptions or potentially destructive rumors. As we know, such perceptions or beliefs often lead to damaging behaviors.

Now, it's time to decide which perception needs correcting the most, and that is the public relations goal you will pursue. For example, correct that inaccuracy, straighten out that misconception or correct that hurtful rumor from false to true.

But HOW do you reach that goal? You select a strategy from among the three available to address perception or opinion problems: reinforce existing opinion, change that perception, or create perception/opinion where none exists.

Now here is the most challenging step for you and your public relations team – prepare the corrective message especially designed to alter the offending target audience perception. The message must be clear and truthful, of course. And it must be both persuasive and compelling if it is to hold the attention of members of your target audience and really move specific opinion in your direction.

That was the tough step. Here is an easy one for you and your public relations people. Select the communications tactics to carry your newly-minted message to the eyes and ears of members of your target audience. And there are tons of tactics out there from speeches, press releases, group briefings and media interviews to newsletters, op-eds, emails, special events and so many others. Just make certain each tactic you select has a proven track record for reaching people similar to those who make up your target audience.

Soon, you and your PR staff will want to know if the program is working. And that means one more series of meetings with folks selected from your target audience. Same questions, but this time with a big difference. You want clear signs that the offending perception is actually being altered.

You can always speed up the process by adding more communications tactics, AND increasing their frequency.

This way, based on a sound fundamental premise, and instead of “toast,” your public relations effort stands a good chance of delivering to you those really important external audience behaviors you need to achieve your department, division or subsidiary objectives.

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Bob Kelly counsels, writes and speaks to business, non-profit and association managers about using the fundamental premise of public relations to achieve their operating objectives. He has been DPR, Pepsi-Cola Co.; AGM-PR, Texaco Inc.; VP-PR, Olin Corp.; VP-PR, Newport News Shipbuilding & Drydock Co.; director of communications, U.S. Department of the Interior, and deputy assistant press secretary, The White House.
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