

Public Relations: Where's The Value?

By Robert A. Kelly

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Public relations' obvious values not only justify their expense, they make one wonder why any organization intent on achieving its goals and objectives would want to pursue them without the support of a first-class public relations effort.

True, some values may be less obvious, but they are just as useful to organization life and operations as those public relations values that jump right off the page.

Fundamental Value

Just look at 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.

Reading those words, can anyone seriously question whether any organization – business, non-profit or public entity – should embrace this discipline?

I believe the gold medal value is contained in that very fundamental premise – i.e., the behaviors of your key audiences are crucial to the success of your organization. If those audiences don't behave as you would like them to, achieving your organization's most important goals and objectives will be immensely more difficult.

The fundamental premise tells us that precisely because public relations zeros in on altering the perceptions, and thus behaviors of your key target audiences, it helps you get to where you want to be. Which strongly suggests that the proper application of public relations can be central not only to your organization's success, but possibly to its very survival.

Strategic Value

Public opinion is the leverage that allows us to succeed. But our most significant contribution to organizational achievement is the strategic ability to create, change or reinforce existing public perception and behaviors. It is this capability, this talent if you will, that can lead an employer/client to organization success.

Tactical Value

Equally valuable is public relation's ability to follow with carefully selected tactics tailored to reach target audiences with effective communications, to create and also tailor persuasive messages designed to influence their perception/behavior, and to gain momentum and impact by implementing those tactics with pinpoint accuracy and timing.

In the process, the employer/client receives value and benefits when public relations gains and holds the understanding and acceptance of those audiences, those publics, without which his or her organization cannot prosper.

Reputational Value

Concurrently in the process, the organization's reputation is burnished delivering value that only strengthens its ability to pursue successfully its goals and objectives.

A successful business benefitting from public relations values such as these is more able to meet its obligations to society as a good corporate citizen, taxpayer, employer and reliable maker/supplier of quality, fairly-priced goods or services – thus delivering enormous value by serving the public interest.

Public relations problems and challenges are usually defined by what people THINK about a set of facts versus the truth of the matter. Often, this is off-putting to people – somehow, it seems to mean that public relations is without substance. But the key factor to remember here is that how people PERCEIVE the facts leads inevitably to very real, predictable behaviors which can, and often do create the clear and present public relations problem to which we commit our resources.

Measurement Value

Yet another value of public relations is the reality that all-important behavior changes can be clearly monitored and assessed as to their degree of success, i.e., gathering evidence for those paying the bill that the communications tactics have actually changed behaviors.

We look for signs of this success via Internet chatter, in print and broadcast news coverage, reports from the field, letters-to-the-editor, consumer and customer reactions, shareholder letters, comments from community leaders, informal polls of employees, retirees, industrial neighbors and local businesses as well as feedback gathered from suppliers and the reaction from elected officials, union leaders and government agencies.

Of course this places a special burden on each tactic selected to carry the message to a target audience: does it/will it make a tangible, action-producing contribution towards altering target audience perceptions and behaviors? If not, it should be dropped and replaced with a tactic that does. This kind of rolling evaluation is one of public relations' less obvious values, but a value, nonetheless, to the employer/client.

Not surprisingly, this again spotlights the basic value served-up by the discipline – we deliver the bacon to our employer/client who, first and foremost, wants a change in the behaviors of certain key audiences leading directly to achieving his or her business objectives

The End-Game For This Value-Rich Discipline?

When you as the employer/client 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 and the primary value we provide.

Still, 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 provide that primary value.

But the best part is that when the behavioral changes become apparent, and meet the program’s original behavior modification goal, three satisfying values are realized:

One, the public relations program is a success. Two, by achieving the behavioral goal you set at the beginning, you 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 you wish to influence, you are using public relations’ core value to its very best advantage.

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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