

Publicrelationistas?

By Robert A. Kelly

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Is that what we are? Fanatic, over-the-top disciples of some wretched obsession?

Well, maybe not fanatic, or even wretched or obsessive, but certainly SOLD on the reality that people act on their own perception of the facts before them, leading to predictable behaviors. And equally sold on the next step too, create, change or reinforce that perception/opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-desired-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization.

Why am I sold on what amounts to a fundamental premise for public relations? Because it's the best way to insure that you, as a manager, get the key external audience behaviors you need to help achieve your unit objectives.

It also makes the proper execution of the public relations program very important to other managers like yourself in any business, non-profit or association.

Here's one approach that can work just fine.

Jot down your unit's, or department's, most important audiences, then prioritize them as to the impacts they exert on your operation. Let's look at #1 on the list because, clearly, any organization, including yours, must stay in touch with its most important external audiences in order to know how it is perceived, remembering of course, that behaviors usually follow perceptions.

Now, you need to interact with members of your target audiences, monitor what they think about you and ask lots of questions. "What do you know about us? Have you had any contact with us. Was it satisfactory?" and so on. Be alert to an untruth, an inaccuracy, or a potentially damaging rumor.

The responses to your opinion monitoring form the basis for your public relations goal. In other words, the specific perception to be altered, followed by the desired behavior change.

Obviously, the goal will seek corrective action. That is, clear up a misconception, scotch a rumor, or correct an inaccuracy.

But a goal without a strategy is like a hot dog without a bun.

We're fortunate we have just three choices when it comes to strategies to deal with opinion matters: we can create perception where there isn't any, change existing perception, or reinforce it. But make sure the strategy you select flows naturally from your newly-minted goal.

Now, here's where the art comes in. You have to write the corrective message going to the attention of members of the target audience. The satisfying part of this chore is the fact that, done right, it will change opinion and, thus, behavior. No small feat!

The art lies in the writer's ability to prepare a message that accomplishes that objective clearly and in a believable, persuasive and compelling style. Not easy, but an absolute must!

How do you get that message "into the end zone?" That is, before the eyes and into the ears of members of your target audience?

Good old "beasts of burden" communications tactics will come through for you and carry your message to the attention of your target audience members. And there are scores of them ripe for the picking.

You can choose from letters-to-the-editor, speeches and news releases as well as consumer meetings, brochures, radio interviews and many, many others. Just be careful that the communications tactics you choose have a good record for reaching folks like those in your target audience.

The day will come when someone asks, "are we making any progress with this PR effort?" A good and proper question, the answer to which is available back out among the members of your target audience. Assuming your budget cannot accommodate pricey professional opinion surveys, you and your colleagues can re-monitor perceptions among audience members asking the same questions as before.

The difference this time around is that you will be watching for

perceptions altered in your direction – perceptions changed as a result of your corrective message and some aggressive communications tactics.

You can always increase the beat by adding a few more communications tactics, and increasing their frequencies. And be sure to re-vet the message itself for clarity and actual impact.

The payoff is clearcut – you get the key external audience behaviors you need to help achieve your mission objectives.

end

Bob Kelly counsels, writes and speaks to general management personnel about the fundamental premise of public relations. 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. <mailto:bobkelly@TNI.net>
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