

# Successful Small Businesses Use PR

By Robert A. Kelly

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It's obvious when a small business has accepted the fact that its most important outside audiences need lots of care and feeding. They do something about it.

There's a sense of urgency and a recognition that those "key target publics" have behaviors that really impact the business, and that they had BETTER do something about it!

What about you? Are you ready to follow the winners and get public relations working for your small business?

The payoff can be significant – key audience behaviors that directly support your business objectives and make the difference between failure and success.

But, as always, there's some work connected to reaching that pot of gold, but it's really worth the effort.

If you're willing, begin by listing those most important outsiders in a priority ranking. Probably, customers and prospects will take #1 and #2 positions. But others rate a spot on that list depending on how crucial they are to the success of your business. In fact, an audience only makes the list if, left unattended, its perceptions and behaviors actually can hurt your business.

You're at a disadvantage when you don't know what those important external audiences think of you and your small business. And the only affordable way to find out is for you and your colleagues to talk to members of that key audience by interacting with them. Ask questions about what they think of you, your business and its products or services. Especially watch for any negativity, misconceptions, inaccuracies, wrong-headed beliefs, or rumors. And monitor local print and broadcast media, especially local talk shows and newspaper pages, for similarly negative signs.

The responses you gather help you set your public relations goal. For instance, correct that wrong-headed belief; fix that inaccuracy; or straighten-out that misconception. The goal, by the way, will also become your behavior modification marker against which progress can be tracked.

But how do you get there? You select a strategy from the three available to you: create perception/opinion where none may exist, change existing perception/opinion, or reinforce it. The public relations goal you just set will lead you directly to the right choice of strategies.

The message you send to your target audience is crucial, and writing it can be hard work because it must alter the negativity you found when you interviewed audience members.

Above all, it must be persuasive while clearly presenting the facts. It must be credible, believable and timely as it explains truthfully what is at issue at that moment. In short, your message must be compelling.

Getting that finished message to the right eyes and ears is your next challenge. And that means selecting the right communications tactics, and you have dozens of them available to you. Speeches, press releases, emails, meetings, radio and newspaper interviews, action alerts, brochures, newsletters and so many others.

Before long, you'll be looking for indications that your new public relations program is making progress.

After the communications effort has had six or eight weeks to take effect, it seems obvious that the best way to determine that is to go back to members of your key target audience, interact with them again and ask more questions. The difference this time, however, is that you are looking for signs that your carefully prepared message is really altering the negativity you discovered during your interviews with those target audience members. And once again, keep an eye and ear on local media for similar signs that your message has been heard.

If you're anxious to speed up the process, boost the number and variety of the communications tactics you're using, as well as their frequencies.

What you want is for your second monitoring go-around to show marked perception change which tells you clearly that the behaviors you really want are on the way.

In the PR business, that creates success.

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