

Sure-Fire Recipe For A Successful Public Relations Career

By Robert A. Kelly

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Without a solid, well-designed foundation, few buildings successfully withstand the ravages of time and weather. And so it is with public relations, ever-dependent upon how well its practitioners understand the discipline.

Yet, some public relations people manage to go through their entire career without a firm grasp of what public relations is all about. Their response to crises, or to requests for well thought-out solutions to public relations problems, reveals 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.

If you are new to the business, grasp early-on The Rosetta Stone of public relations, i.e., a guide to understanding the discipline and its core strength. Namely, people act on their perception of the facts; those perceptions lead to certain behaviors; and something can be done about those perceptions and behaviors that lead to achieving an organization's objectives.

The fact is that NO organization business, non-profit or public sector can succeed today unless the behaviors of its most important audiences are in-sync with the organization's objectives. Which is why, when public relations goes on to successfully create, change or reinforce public opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization, it accomplishes its mission.

By all means discuss public relations' strategic role in any organization with professionals whom you respect. But do it early, do it seriously, and do it now so that you create that solid foundation of understanding about this business that will help you make a meaningful contribution to the field of public relations for many years to come.

Once that foundation of understanding is firmly set, an action pathway begins to appear:

- identify the problem or challenge
- set the public relations goal
- set the public relations strategy
- identify target audiences

- prepare persuasive messages
- select/implement key communications tactics
- monitor progress
- and the end game? Meet the behavior modification goal.

A bonus: you are using a near-perfect public relations performance measurement. I mean how can you measure the results of an activity more accurately than when you clearly achieve the goal you set at the beginning of that activity? You can't. It's pure success

So, if you are a newcomer to the business, can you expect to avoid the pitfalls listed above? Yes, and here's why:

- With proper preparation, you will not confuse action tactics with the basic mission of public relations because you will know precisely what each is and just what fits where in the public relations problem solving sequence outlined above.
- You will feel more confident about providing counsel to the employer/client because the public relations problem at hand can be clearly identified allowing you to select solutions that obviously fit into the action sequence above. You will accurately identify your target audiences because you will know exactly who your employer/client wants to reach, and the necessary action tactics will then be self-evident.
- You realize that you have gone through your entire career WITH a firm, successful grasp of what public relations is all about.

But, on the way you must do everything necessary to reach your target audiences, and to nurture the relationships between those audiences and the employer/client by burnishing the reputation of the organization, its products or services. You'll do your best to persuade those audiences to do what the client/employer wishes them to do. And, while seeking public understanding and acceptance of your client/employer, you'll insure that your joint activities not only comply with the law, but clearly serve the public interest. Then, you pull-out all tactical stops to actually move those individuals to action. Your client will be pleased that you have brought matters to this point.

When that client measures your real effectiveness, I suggest that he or she will be fully satisfied with those public relations results only when your "reach, persuade and move-to-desired action" efforts produce a visible, and desired, modification in the behaviors of those people your client/employer wishes to influence. In my view, this is the central, strategic function of public relations the basic context in which you must pursue that successful public relations career and a lesson best learned at the beginning of your career.

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Ready For A Business Recovery?

by Robert A. Kelly

Who wants to face the challenges of a business recovery without a ton of firepower? Especially when getting your piece of the action almost certainly depends upon how well you modify the behaviors of your target audiences.

That's why public relations had better play a central role in your business planning. Particularly since any recovery that takes place will be the result of industrial, commercial and individual consumers alike starting to behave like buyers, whether of luxury real estate, frozen pizzas, industrial transformers or information technology.

So, before this train leaves the station, if you are unsure how best to use public relations in the expected recovery, consider its basic mission firmly rooted in the principle that people act on their own perception of the facts. Then it strives to create, change or reinforce public opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization. When the behavioral changes become apparent, and meet the program's original behavior modification goal, the program has succeeded.

But what comes first? How about a real acceptance that (1) individual perception of the facts is THE guiding light leading to behavioral change, and (2) that something really CAN be done about those perceptions. Think about that for a moment – not every one buys it. For me, I can tell you it was an epiphany of immense proportion that actually helped shape my career in public relations.

First, we set the goal whether it be to move consumers to try a new soft drink flavor; or to perceive your organization in a new light thus strengthening its reputation; or to lead them to a positive perception of the company in turn leading to new investments in the company's shares.

Next, what strategy will it take to reach that goal? Opinion Creation, Change or Reinforcement?

Creation

Now the real public opinion work begins. The public relations squad must decide whether opinion among key audiences is to be created from scratch, requiring a lot of basic data, information and interpretation from which a person can form an initial opinion.

Change

Or, are we talking about a change in opinion, a nudge in one direction or the other requiring a clear, credible and well-supported explanation of, and rationale for why anyone should alter their current views?

Reinforcement

Or, do we simply reinforce opinion that pretty much tracks

with the opinion level we desire? Here, we use simple corroboration and additional third-party support to strengthen existing public opinion.

But for each of the three choices, the information and data to be communicated must be creditably sourced, crystal-clear and logically presented.

On to reach, persuade and move-to-action

Reach

Now, it's time to actually reach your key audiences, people whose behaviors will affect your organization. Among others, these stakeholders include customers, employees, prospects, retirees, media, legislators, regulators, and both financial and plant communities.

But reaching these target groups means applying the most effective communications tactics available to you. These will include such tools as media relations and publicity-generating news conferences and press releases, newsletters and e-mails, high-profile speeches, charitable contributions, investor relations, informal opinion surveys and many others.

Special events also will be high on the "reach" action list: newsworthy events like trade shows, open houses, awards ceremonies, contests, VIP receptions, financial roadshows, and even media-attracting stunts. At the same time, marketing counsel will want to develop sales-oriented communications to help build brand franchise, win consumer acceptance and gain competitive advantage.

Persuade

Persuading your key audiences, the third leg of the opinion troika, is yet another challenge because bringing these important groups of stakeholders around to your way of thinking depends heavily on the quality of the message you prepare for each target audience.

It's hard work. You must understand and identify what is really at issue at the moment; impart a sense of credibility to your comments; perform regular assessments of how opinion is currently running among that group, constantly adjusting your message; as well as highlighting those key issue points most likely to engage their attention and involvement; and finally, identify and build into your messages pre-tested, action-producing incentives for individuals to take the actions you desire.

By the way, those incentives could include the very strength of your position on the issues, a new plant expansion holding the promise of more jobs and taxes for the City, or even your

organization's efforts to attract low and middle income housing to the area.

Implementation

Equally important to moving into action with highly effective communications tactics will be the selection and perceived credibility of the actual spokespeople who will deliver your messages. They must be

seen as people of stature, and they must speak with authority, personal confidence and conviction if meaningful media coverage is to be achieved.

Now, Let's Gain and Hold

By this time, your action program should begin to gain and hold the kind of public understanding and acceptance that will lead to the desired shift in public behavior.

And The End-Game? Modify Behavior, Achieve your Goal

When the changes in behaviors become truly apparent through media reports, thought-leader comment, employee and community chatter and a variety of other feedback -- at the same time clearly meeting your original behavior modification goal -- I'll say again that your public relations program can be deemed a success.

Obviously, your piece of the action in the business recovery ahead will come at a price. And that will be your cost to efficiently modify the behaviors of your target audiences. But, the payoff makes it all worthwhile -- nothing less than the achievement of your business objectives and, at slight risk of overstatement, a real contribution to the survival of your organization.

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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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