

The Truth About Public Relations

By Robert A. Kelly

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The truth is, you CAN attract the support of those external audiences whose behaviors have the most effect on your enterprise. But you must do it by first achieving the positive changes you need in their perceptions and, thus, behaviors.

You'll get both using this strategic approach to public relations which means your chances of achieving your organizational objectives are enhanced.

It all starts with the fundamental premise of public relations shown just below.

“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 those people whose behaviors affect the organization, the public relations mission is accomplished.”

The core strength of those comments lies in the behavior changes that can take place among your key, outside audiences. When those changes occur – and the combined perceptions of members of that important external “public” begin to move in your direction – it can spell public relations success.

For instance, with a strong factual basis, you convince area activists gathering at your plant gate that (1) you don't dump chemicals into the river, and (2) both State and Federal investigations found that to be true. When they finally clear out, you've limited the damage an expensive and long-lasting disruption could have caused. That saved the organization cold, hard cash!

What happened? You managed to change the perception of those activists which, predictably, led to the change in their behavior that you desired. In other words, a successful use of

public relations' fundamental premise.

While public relations can bring real power to bear, and while there's a well-worn path leading to each success, truth is, you can't change perceptions, and thus behaviors of your important outside audiences if you are not in touch with them on a regular and meaningful basis.

That's why it's so important to interact with members of each target audience, and ask questions. What do you think of our services, our programs, or our products? Are you satisfied? Listen carefully for signs of a misconception or a factual inaccuracy. Is there a belief alive out there that simply isn't true? Do you detect a hurtful rumor that must be squashed?

The answers you receive let you establish your public relations goal. For example, correct that inaccuracy, clear up that misconception, or get out the facts in order to neutralize that rumor.

But how will you actually reach that goal? With a clear and urgent strategy.

Fortunately, in dealing with perception/opinion, we have just three options available to us. Create perception/opinion where there is none, change existing perception, or reinforce it.

The goal you established will quickly tell you which strategy choice you must make.

But, of course, what you say to that target audience, in pursuit of your public relations goal, is crucial. Your message must be persuasive, compelling and clear as a mountain stream. It also must be credible and believable, which means truthful in all detail. It should also address the particular inaccuracy, misconception or rumor head on and not allow room for any further misunderstandings.

Now, how do you get that carefully chiseled message to the attention of members of that key, target audience? I still call them "beasts of burden" because they carry messages from Point A to Point B. Communications tactics is the answer, and you have a huge selection from which to choose. Everything from open houses, contests, news releases and speeches to brochures, community briefings, letters-to-the-editor, emails, radio/TV and newspaper interviews, and lots more.

Sooner rather than later, you will wonder whether you're making any progress. And the only realistic way to nail that down is to go back to members of that target audience again and ask them the same questions all over again.

The big difference this time around is, you're looking for signs that opinion/perceptions have begun to change in your direction. By that I mean clear indications that the misconception is clearing up, or the inaccuracy has been corrected, or that a negative impression is slowly turning around.

Truth is, that's when this strategic, and powerful approach to public relations – supported by appropriate tactical firepower – delivers the altered perceptions and modified behaviors promised in the fundamental premise of public relations.

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