

The Ultimate PR Scam

By Robert A. Kelly

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It happens to business, non-profit and association managers when their public relations budget fails to deliver the crucial external audience behaviors they need to achieve their department, division or subsidiary objectives.

Behaviors they should have received leading directly to boosts in repeat purchases; growing community support; more tech firms specifying the manager's components; increased capital donations; stronger employee retention rates; new waves of prospects, or healthy membership increases.

If that rings your bell, you need to take two actions.

First, insist that your public relations activity is based on a fundamental premise like this: 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 the very people whose behaviors affect the organization the most, the public relations mission is accomplished.

Second, as the manager for whom they labor, get personally involved with the professionals managing your PR effort. Tell those specialists that you must list, then prioritize those key external audiences whose behaviors effect your unit the most.

Identify that outside audience sitting at the top of your slate, and we'll work on it right now.

Nothing happens, of course, until you gather some pithy information. Namely, how do members of that key target audience, whose behaviors affect your unit's success or failure, actually perceive you?

You and/or your PR team must interact with members of that audience and monitor their perceptions by asking a number of questions: Do you know anything about us? What have you heard about our services or products? Have you ever had contact with our organization? Was it satisfactory?

The trick here is to stay vigilant for negative signs, in particular, untruths, exaggerations, inaccuracies, rumors or misconceptions.

By the time you complete this exercise, you will have gathered the raw material you need to establish a corrective public relations goal. It might aim to fix an inaccuracy, clear up a misconception or lay that rumor to rest.

How you get to that goal, however, is another question because you have just three strategy choices when it comes to perception/ opinion matters like this. Create perception/opinion where there isn't any, reinforce existing opinion, or change it. A warning: insure that your new strategy is an obvious match for your new public relations goal.

Now, alert your team to a real writing challenge – a message tasked with altering the offending perception. Which means your writer must produce a message that changes what many target audience members now believe. No easy job!

It must be clear about how the current perception is out of kilter. And it must not only be truthful, but persuasive, compelling and believable if it is to lead ultimately to the desired behavior. True heavy lifting!

By the way, messages like that best retain their credibility when delivered along with another news announcement or presentation, rather than a dedicated, high-profile press release.

Speaking of delivery, it's time for you and your PR team to select the communications tactics to carry that message of yours to members of a target audience that really needs to hear it. Fortunately, there are dozens of such tactics awaiting your pleasure – speeches, radio/newspaper interviews, brochures, op-eds, newsmaker events, newsletters and many, many more. Be careful that the tactics you use have a record of reaching folks just like those you're aiming at.

It won't be long before people around you begin asking about progress. Which, once again, will put your team back in the opinion monitoring mode out among the members of your target audience. And the questions they ask will be very similar to those used in the first perception monitoring session.

Difference this time around will be your close attention to just how much current perceptions are really undergoing the change for which you planned. You want solid signs that the offending perception is actually being altered.

You can always shovel more coal into the boiler by adding new communications tactics, then using them more frequently to achieve faster progress.

When you apply a comprehensive and workable plan like this, you have little to fear from “a PR scam.” Instead, you are on-track to achieve those key audience behaviors you must have to reach your unit’s operating objectives.

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Bob Kelly counsels, writes and speaks to business, non-profit and association managers about using the fundamental premise of public relations to achieve their operating objectives. 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.
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