

# What Does the Public Relations Client REALLY Want, and Why?

By Robert A. Kelly

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It's not unusual for clients of service providers to insist that their budget dollars be quickly applied to a variety of flashy tactics. Yet, when pressed, many acknowledge that what they REALLY want for their money is visible, end-game change.

This is especially true in public relations where clients often second-guess careful plans for achieving that end-game change by insisting on premature use of tactics like news releases, talk-show appearances and sports sponsorships.

But obviously, flashy tactics alone will not satisfy those clients once they start looking for a return on their public relations investment. Because it is then that it becomes clear, sometimes painfully, that their goal MUST be the kind of change in the behaviors of key stakeholders that lead directly to achieving their business objectives. Thus, it is quality planning, and the degree of behavioral change it produces, that eventually captures client attention, not tactics.

These days, with public relations budgets in mortal danger from a softening economy, the old tactical chats between a client CEO and public relations counsel probably sound more like this: "Do something about those activists chaining themselves to our plant gate and yelling that our emissions go into the river. It's costing us big money each day that plant is shut down."

Or, "How are we going to calm down those Garden Club members down in the lobby waving around those cockamamie newspaper reports and talking to the TV cameras about the additives we use? Where'd that reporter get those numbers, anyway? It's costing us sales!"

Or, "Please people, what are you doing to encourage a favorable Town Council vote on our petition for that new

highway off-ramp?"

What's common to each of those rants? The CEO is asking his public relations people to modify somebody's behavior. He doesn't want to talk tactics, or even strategies. He wants those activists off his property, he wants those print and broadcast reporters to do a fairer job of reporting on his production methods (hopefully getting the Garden Clubbers off his back), and he wants a real effort made to move public opinion in a way that encourages local officials to approve that badly needed vehicle ramp.

Modify somebody's behavior, that's his goal, and that's our job. Fortunately, the key to our efforts and our success is the fact that people really DO act on their perception of the facts. In so doing, and in a cumulative way, they form the very public opinion that we must now inform.

So, what is our strategy? We're going to reach those perceptions with the facts as we know them. Hopefully, our messages will be clear and persuasive, and will change negative or inaccurate perceptions, then alter behaviors in our direction.

Using the three examples above, when the activists become satisfied with our explanations of the company's new, public commitment to correct their emission problems, we expect the protesters will leave the plant gates.

We also believe editorial board meetings with local newspapers and television stations will begin to bear fruit with more balanced reportage of the company's efforts to meet emission standards which, in turn, will reduce negative public opinion.

And, while our briefing sessions with town council staff do little to hasten a formal vote, we believe a targeted communications effort will lead to a community opinion poll showing positive movement in public, then official sentiment about the new highway off-ramp.

In the end, a sound public relations strategy combined with effective tactics leads directly to the bottom line – perceptions altered; behaviors modified; client satisfied.

end

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