

Why PR Packs a Punch

By Robert A. Kelly

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Done right, it delivers the key, target audience behaviors you know you must have to achieve your organizational objectives.

I refer to perceptions of your organization, and resulting behaviors such as:

- ...customers making repeat purchases;
- ...prospects starting to do business with you;
- ...employees really valuing their jobs;
- ...suppliers doing all possible to expand your relationship;
- ...community leaders strengthening bonds with you;
- ...businesses seeking beneficial joint ventures;
- ...unions bargaining more frequently in good faith;
- ...and legislators and political leaders viewing you as an important member of the business community.

Yes, public relations indeed packs a punch, but only when it's based on a solid foundation. Namely, its fundamental premise. 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

And, notice, please, the implication is that when managers start looking for a return on their public relations investment these days, many will want to see the kind of key stakeholder behavior change that leads directly to achieving their objectives.

Does your public relations program pack such a punch?

It can if you commit to action steps like these:

The list of key audiences shown above is a good one, but only you can create the ideal list of the most important external

“publics” whose behaviors affect your organization the most.

Then, prioritize them as to impacts on your enterprise, and let's work on the target audience at the top of the list. By the way, the test for listing an audience is, does its behaviors affect my operation in any way? If it does, list it.

Do you know for a fact how they perceive your organization? Why take chances? Interact with members of that audience and ask many questions. What do they think of your enterprise? Do you notice negativity in their responses? How about rumors, misconceptions, inaccuracies?

With responses to such questions in hand, you're ready to set down your public relations goal. In other words, the specific perception problem and, thus, behavior change you want. For instance, kill that rumor as soon as possible, straighten out that misconception or untruthful belief, or correct that inaccuracy.

So, what do you do with that public relations goal? Not much without a strategy. But with the right one, you are quite likely to achieve your goal. Happily, when dealing with opinion and perception challenges, you have just three from which to choose: create perception/opinion where there may be none, change existing perception, or reinforce it. The strategy you choose will compliment your new public relations goal.

Now comes the hard work, creating just the right message for transmittal to your target audience. It must layout the truth clearly and creditably, so consider it carefully. The features of a successful corrective message are clarity, believability, persuasiveness and a compelling presentation. Remember, the message aims to alter existing perception.

Presumably, you will not follow the lead of the artillery commander who told his men, “Point your cannons in any direction and fire when you feel like it!” Rather your “beasts of burden,” your communications tactics, will carry your message directly to the right eyes and ears among members of your target audience.

The list of such tactics is a long one. Everything from speeches, newspaper/radio interviews and press releases to op-eds, brochures, emails and many, many others.

It won't be long before you are looking for signs that your public relations program is working. And this can best be achieved by a new round of perception monitoring out there among members of your key target audience. Same questions as the first go-around, but now you're looking for responses indicating that perception has been altered in your direction.

Things not moving fast enough? Broaden the variety of communications tactics you use, and their frequencies. And take a

hard look at the facts undergirding your message.

Together, these steps will create a public relations effort that packs the punch you really want.

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