

Why Small Business Must Turn to PR

By Robert A. Kelly

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Robert A. Kelly
bobbkelly@TNI.net

PRCommentary.com LLC <http://www.prcommentary.com>

If small business had no important outside audiences, it wouldn't exist.

But since they do have external "publics," it's doubly unfortunate when those same small business owners seem unconcerned about the very outside folks whose behaviors can place a choke-hold on their business!

And worse, are so casual about public relations, the best way to move those behaviors in their direction.

Is that you? What's the problem? Can you think of any other way to marshal those groups of people you need so badly if your business is to succeed?

Face it. You must turn to public relations if you are really serious about getting those important outside people to support what you are trying to do.

And the best part is, there's no mystery about how to do it!

Start today by listing your important outside audiences in priority order. No doubt, customers and prospects will place #1 and #2. But think carefully about your local and trade media as well as community residents and leaders, suppliers and the like. The test for adding an external audience to your worry list is this: if left unattended, could its perceptions and behaviors hurt your business?

Since there is no other affordable way to find out how each of your target audiences perceive your business, products, services and operations, you must take the time to do it yourself along with your colleagues. Interact with members of that key target audience and probe their perceptions with plenty of questions. Watch for misconceptions, inaccuracies and rumors that need to be corrected. Stay alert to negativity of any kind.

This will let you decide how much you will try to alter perceptions

among each audience. It also becomes the behavior modification goal against which you will measure your progress.

Now it's message time. What will you say to members of your target audience to alter that negative perception that surfaced during your conversations with them? Your message must be persuasive, so stick with the facts and present them clearly. By identifying honestly what is really at issue at the moment, you impart a sense of credibility to your comments, and their timeliness adds a compelling dimension to your message.

What's the best way to get that message to the eyes and ears of members of your target audience?

Here, you have an embarrassment of riches with dozens of communications tactics including news announcements, op-eds, letters-to-the-editor, speeches, community briefings, broadcast and newspaper interviews and many, many others.

Progress can best be tracked by interacting all over again with members of the target audience. While you'll ask questions similar to those you asked in your earlier monitoring sessions, this time you're looking for signs that your message got through. In other words, signs that your message succeeded in altering any negative perceptions of your business.

You should also monitor print and broadcast media, key customers and prospects for similar indications of success.

Should progress not be fast enough for you, you'll want to consider increasing the number of communications tactics you employ as well as the frequency of their use. Your message should also be re-evaluated for its factual basis and clarity.

Gradually, your monitoring will playback perception changes among that target audience, and that means the behaviors you seek will not be far behind.

It is this kind of success that tells us very clearly why small business must turn to PR if it is to realize its potential.

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Bob Kelly counsels, writes and speaks about the fundamental premise of public relations. 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. <mailto:bobkelly@TNI.net>
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