



WHAT ARE WE TEACHING PR STUDENTS?

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What Are We Teaching PR Students?

How to do brochures, throw parties, talk to reporters and write press releases? Or, are we teaching them what PR's fundamental premise says we should be teaching them?

In so many words, whether they go to work for a business, non-profit, government agency or association, students will soon discover that 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 usually accomplished.

Which is why, after public relations students digest THAT basic touchstone, they should be made aware that, as future managers, their core public relations mission will be to pull together the resources and action planning they need to alter individual perception leading to changed behaviors among their most important outside audiences.

But that's not all! Then PR students should learn that they will have to persuade those key folks to his or her way of thinking, then move them to take actions that allow their subsidiary, division, department, group or office to succeed.

What we want for our new crop of PR students is the knowledge that the right public relations planning really CAN alter individual perception and lead to changed behaviors among the very outside audiences who will help them succeed as managers.

Should you find yourself explaining the role of public relations, you must ask your audience to remember that their PR efforts will demand more than the use of special events, news releases and talk show tactics if they are to receive the quality public relations results they deserve.

As to the results they can expect, tell them how glad they'll be that they took your advice when capital givers or specifying sources begin to look their way; customers start to make repeat purchases; membership applications begin to rise; new proposals for strategic alliances and joint ventures start showing up; politicians and legislators begin looking at them as key members of the business, non-profit or association communities; new bounces in show room visits occur; prospects actually start to do business with them; and community leaders begin to seek them out.

Discuss with your audience why it's SO important to know how your most important outside audiences perceive your operations, products or services. Above all, be sure they really believe that perceptions almost always result in behaviors that can help or hurt their operation.

Go over with them the need for monitoring and gathering perceptions by questioning members of their most important outside audiences. Have them ask questions like these: how much do you know about our organization? Have you had prior contact with us and were you pleased with the interchange? Are you familiar with our services or products and employees? Have you experienced problems with our people or procedures?

They should learn that the cost of using professional survey firms to do the opinion gathering work will be considerably more than using their PR colleagues who are already in the perception business. But whether it's their people or a survey firm asking the questions, the objective remains the same: identify untruths, false assumptions, unfounded rumors, inaccuracies, misconceptions and any other negative perception that might translate into hurtful behaviors.

Public relations students need to know that here they must establish a goal calling for action on the most serious problem areas they uncovered during their key audience perception monitoring. Will that goal be to straighten out a dangerous misconception? Correct a gross inaccuracy? Or, stop a potentially painful rumor before it really gets started?

An equally important lesson is this. Setting a PR goal requires an equally specific strategy that tells you how to get there. Only three strategic options are available to you when it comes to doing something about perception and opinion. Change existing perception, create perception where there may be none, or reinforce it. The wrong strategy pick will taste like mushroom gravy on your pumpkin pie, so be sure your new strategy fits well with your new public relations goal. You certainly don't want to select "change" when the facts dictate a strategy of reinforcement.

Most students of public relations already know the importance of good writing. Explain to them that now is the time that good writing comes to the fore. They must prepare a persuasive message that will help move their key audience to their way of thinking. It must be a carefully-written message targeted directly at their key external audience. They must come up with really corrective language that is not merely compelling, persuasive and believable, but clear and factual if they are to shift perception/opinion towards their point of view and lead to the behaviors they have in mind.

This step many of your students will find especially interesting. They must now select the communications tactics most likely to carry their message to the attention of their target audience. There are many available. From speeches, facility tours, emails and brochures to consumer briefings, media interviews, newsletters, personal meetings and many others. But be certain that the tactics they pick are known to reach folks just like their audience members.

Another reality PR students need to know is that the credibility of any message is fragile, so how they communicate it is also a concern. Which is why they may wish to unveil their corrective message before smaller meetings and presentations rather than using higher-profile news releases.

As always, the need for a progress report should cause them to begin a second perception monitoring session with members of their external audience. Fortunately, they'll want to use many of the same questions used in the benchmark session. But now, they will be on strict alert for signs that the bad news perception is being altered in their direction.

Reassure your student audience that, should program momentum slow, they can always speed things up by adding more communications tactics as well as increasing their frequencies.

Students everywhere need reassurance that they're on the right track, and future business, non-profit, government and association managers getting their first exposure to PR are no different. What they need to know about public relations are three realities.

First, as outlined above, they must marshal the resources and action planning needed to alter individual perception leading to changed behaviors among their most important outside audiences.

Second, they must help persuade those key folks to his or her way of thinking.

And third, move them to take actions that allow their division, subsidiary, department, group or office to succeed.