



MANAGERS: SHOULD YOUR PR BUDGET STRESS TACTICS OR STRATEGY?

If public relations tactics like special events, brochures, broadcast plugs and press releases dominate your answer, you're missing the best PR has to offer.

Such a budget would tell us that you believe tactics ARE public relations. And that would be too bad, because it means you are not effectively planning to alter individual perception among your key outside audiences which then would help you achieve your managerial objectives.

It would also tell us that, even as a business, non-profit or association manager, you're not planning to do anything positive about the behaviors of those important external audiences of yours that MOST affect your operation. Nor are you preparing to persuade those key outside folks to your way of thinking by helping to move them to take actions that allow your department, division or subsidiary to succeed.

So, it takes more than good intentions for you as a manager to alter individual, key-audience perception leading to changed behaviors. It takes a carefully structured plan dedicated to getting every member of the PR team working towards the same external audience behaviors insuring that the organization's public relations effort stays sharply focused.

The absence of such a plan is always unfortunate because the right public relations planning really CAN alter individual perception and lead to changed behaviors among key outside audiences.

If this sounds vaguely familiar, try to remember that your PR effort must require more than special events, news releases and talk show tactics if you are to receive the quality public relations results you deserve.

The payoff can materialize faster than you may think in the form of welcome bounces in show room visits; customers beginning to make repeat purchases; capital givers or specifying sources beginning to look your way; membership applications on the rise; the appearance of new proposals for strategic alliances and joint ventures; politicians and legislators beginning to look at you as a key member of the business, non-profit or association communities; prospects actually starting to do business with you; and community leaders begin to seek you out.

It's always nice to simply hire a survey firm to handle the opinion monitoring/ data gathering phase of your effort. But that can cost real money. Luckily, your public relations professionals can often fill that bill because they are already in the perception and behavior business. But satisfy yourself that the PR staff really accepts why it's SO important to know how your most important outside audiences perceive your operations, products or services. And be doubly certain they believe that perceptions almost always result in behaviors that can help or hurt your operation.

Share your plans with them for monitoring and gathering perceptions by questioning members of your most important outside audiences. 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?

But whether it's your 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.

It's goal-setting time during which you will establish a goal calling for action on the most serious problem areas you uncovered during your key audience perception monitoring. You'll want to straighten out that dangerous misconception? Correct that gross inaccuracy? Or, stop that potentially painful rumor cold?

Of course, setting your 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 onion gravy on your rhubarb 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.

It's always time for good writing, but never as now. You must prepare a persuasive message that will help move your key audience to your way of thinking. It must be a carefully-written message targeted directly at your key external audience. Select your very best writer because s/he 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 your point of view and lead to the behaviors you have in mind.

Here's where you need the communications tactics certain to carry your message to the attention of your 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 you pick are known to reach folks just like your audience members.

How you communicate, however, is always a major concern. The credibility of any message is always fragile. Which is why you'll probably want to unveil your corrective message before smaller meetings and presentations rather than using higher-profile news releases.

When the need for a progress report appears, you'll want to begin a second perception monitoring session with members of your external audience. You'll certainly use many of the same questions used in the benchmark session. But now, you will be watching closely for signs that the bad news perception is finally moving positively in your direction.

Fortunately, if things slow down, you can always speed things up by adding more communications tactics as well as increasing their frequencies.

Allow the tacticians a free hand in selecting whether this tactic or that tactic should be used as the beast of burden needed to carry your message to your target audience.

You take a broader view of public relations and stress the strategic approach because it requires you as the manager to effectively plan to alter individual perception among your key outside audiences, thus helping you achieve your managerial objectives.