

Title:

Is PR Really A "Soft" Discipline?

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Summary:

If so, what is a "hard" discipline? One that involves HUGEmoney or personal pain? One that absorbs all the general counsel's time? Or, is it the blinding success of a brand new business or, maybe, something that affects individual careers? Or must it simply employ clubs and brass knuckles?

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Article Body:

If so, what is a "hard" discipline? One that involves HUGEmoney or personal pain? One that absorbs all the general counsel's time? Or, is it the blinding success of a brand new business or, maybe, something that affects individual careers? Or must it simply employ clubs and brass knuckles?

I believe public relations is as "hard" as ANY discipline can get when it puts together for a business, non-profit, government agency or association, the resources and action planning needed to alter individual perception leading to changed behaviors among their most important outside audiences. When it goes on to help managers persuade those key folks to his or her way of thinking, then move them to take actions that allow their department, group, division or subsidiary to succeed, that's hard, real hard.

Since, plain and simple, that can mean success or failure for the organization, yes, I'd call it a very "hard" discipline indeed!

And that notion isn't just sitting out there all by itself. Its foundation is the underlying premise of public relations itself: 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.

That's why many managers are comforted by the thought that the right public

relations planning really CAN alter individual perception and lead to changed behaviors among key outside audiences!

Should you be that manager, try to remember that your PR effort must demand more than special events, press releases and brochures if you are to receive the quality public relations results you want.

It will all seem worthwhile when capital givers or specifying sources beginning to look your way; customers begin to make repeat purchases; membership applications start to rise; new proposals for strategic alliances and joint ventures start showing up; politicians and legislators begin looking at you as a key member of the business, non-profit, government or association communities; welcome bounces in show room visits occur; community leaders begin to seek you out, and prospects actually start to do business with you.

Close by are your public relations professionals who can be of real use for your new opinion monitoring project because they are already in the perception and behavior business. But be certain 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. Above all, be sure they believe that perceptions almost always result in behaviors that can help or hurt your operation.

Before you monitor and gather perceptions by questioning members of your most important outside audiences, go over your plans with your PR staff. Rehearse asking 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?

Be ready for an epiphany when you discover that using professional survey firms to do the opinion gathering work will cost considerably more than using those PR folks of yours, who already happen to be in the perception monitoring business. However, 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.

Goal-setting time has arrived, a goal that calls for action on the most serious problem areas you uncovered during your key audience perception monitoring. Will it be to straighten out that dangerous misconception? Correct that gross inaccuracy? Or, stop that potentially painful rumor cold?

The facts of life say that 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 Hollandaise Sauce on your waffles, 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.

Good writing is always important in public relations, but never more so than now. Here, you've got to put together 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 corrective language that is not just compelling, persuasive and believable, but clear and factual if it is to shift perception/opinion towards your point of view and wind up with the behaviors you have in mind.

Selecting the communications tactics most likely to carry your message to the attention of your target audience can be a fun chore. There are many available to you. From speeches, facility tours, emails and brochures to consumer briefings, media interviews, newsletters, personal meetings and many others. Take time to assure yourself that the tactics you pick are known to reach folks just like your audience members.

Another reality we labor under in PR is that the credibility of any message is fragile and always suspect to some folks. So the method you use to communicate it is a very valid concern. Which is why you may wish to unveil such a corrective message through smaller presentations and meetings rather than using higher-profile news releases.

Many eventualities can lead you to begin a second perception monitoring session with members of your external audience. But nothing like talk of progress reports. You'll want to use many of the same questions used in the benchmark session. But now, you will be on strict alert for signs that the bad news perception is being altered in your direction.

Not all programming runs apace, so should momentum flag, you can always move things along by adding more communications tactics as well as increasing their frequencies.

Calling tactical devices tactical devices (like the communications tactics discussed above), avoids confusing them with the broader, more comprehensive mission known as public relations. A mission that we now see allows managers of

all stripes to alter individual perception in a way that leads to changed behaviors among key outside audiences.

A discipline you certainly could call one of the "harder" disciplines insuring the success of any manager's operation.