

Public Relations 101

By Andrew R. Sutton

How many times has your board chair or executive director said the following?

We just need more people to know about us. Go get us some PR.

We're a great agency. Why haven't you gotten us in the news?

Relax. You're not alone.

First, understand that public relations is more than communicating through the media. Think of public relations as issue management or message management. There are many ways to express yourself, and each method is tailored to specific audiences.

Second, public relations is a mixture of pragmatism, hard work, patience and luck. When done well, its processes should help your agency understand itself even more than you hope it to be understood by your stakeholders.

Public relations cannot be addressed episodically – it must be part of your agency's overall strategic direction.

The following steps can help you start a well-rounded public relations program.

Define the Problem

What is the issue your agency seeks to address? Does it want to increase awareness of programs? Does it want to promote an event? Does it hope to lobby for a change in the law? Does it want to prepare for a threat by another entity?

After identifying the problem - in concrete terms - the next step is to define what success looks like. Exactly what will happen if your efforts go according to the plan?

Create a Plan

In the planning and programming phase, stakeholders are identified and strategies are determined.

A stakeholder can be thought of as any person or entity that will be affected by the actions of your agency. For example, in a

media relations strategy, stakeholders can include your staff, volunteers, reporters, editors and of course, the various segments of your audience.

Identifying stakeholders is a very important step. For, each group needs to receive communication in very different ways. Your agency may think it needs a brochure to gain awareness – and it may. However, depending on your audience, you might make a wiser investment by creating a press kit or by establishing a speaker's bureau. This is why identifying stakeholders is so important.

Once stakeholders have been identified, strategies for influencing them can be planned.

If the goal of your agency is to increase awareness, many strategies could be considered. These may include an external relations campaign (communicating with your constituents), a media relations campaign (communicating with the media) or an internal communications campaign (communicating with your staff, board and volunteers).

Execute Tactics

Once the appropriate strategies have been determined, tactics for each strategy can be carried out.

For a media relations campaign, tactics may include a press kit (key information about your agency given to the media), press releases (news summaries sent to the media) or desk-side briefings (visiting members of the media to introduce your agency).

Evaluate Results

The final step is to determine if your plan helped your agency accomplish its objective. If not, list what you would do differently next time.

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