

FEATURE

Employ Strategies of Public Relations Campaigns to Achieve Goals

By Ann S. Murphy

A prominent restaurant in downtown Boston receives word from the board of health that it will be shut down pending and investigation of health violations...

A political candidate launches her first quest for public office...

A technology startup company receives a new round of venture capital to expand its business...

A college graduate embarks on a job search....

These four disparate situations seemingly have nothing in common but they have one common need – a public relations campaign. While each situation is different, all will employ the same strategies to achieve success. Once mastered, effective public relations skills can bring any business owner, political candidate, job seeker or anyone else to his or her desired goals.

The major elements of a public relations campaign are:

- Audience,
- Message,
- Medium.

The No. 1 task at hand when beginning a public relations campaign is to determine who will be listening to your message. Even though it would be great to see your story on the front page of the New York Times, you have to decide whether this is where your target audience gets their information. It could be that they read something with



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more of a local or narrower focus. You may want to target fourth grade elementary school teachers or Fortune 500 CEOs; each audience has specific places they get trusted information.

Then, after you have determined who your audience is, you need to develop your message and figure out how to deliver it to them.

Although the restaurant's script will be vastly different from the job seeker's, the tactics in developing the script are the same. At this stage, you need to put time into developing clear and concise messages that you can use throughout your campaign.

Sometimes, additional research is needed to develop your message. Conventional methods are: telephone polling, online surveys, focus groups and the Internet. Information gathered through research will give you the starting point you will need to develop and target your messages.

Now that you have developed your messages and zeroed in on your target audience, it's time to hit the campaign trail. This means, you move to the next phase of the campaign, and it may involve media relations. One of the most effective ways to get your message across is by garnering earned or "free" media through newspaper stories or broadcast reports about your business. In this year of presidential campaigning, both candidates will spend millions of dollars on advertising about themselves and about their rivals. Where

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the battle will also be waged is on the front page of the newspaper, where the presidential race is covered daily by reporters.

Media relations has more impact on public opinion than advertising does as it is a third-person view of the issue at hand. Audiences know when they are viewing an advertisement and they may be skeptical of the ad's claims because that company or political candidate wrote and bought the ad. That is why free media is so critical, since issues are vetted by a third-party, a journalist, whose job is to get the story straight and deliver the facts.

Why do certain stories make the news? When you pick up the newspaper in the morning or go online to read it, turn on the television or radio, you may hear some stories that you can't imagine how they got there. Why did the story about the Boston Public Garden swans Romeo and Juliet have appeal? It's because animal stories sell newspapers and they get people to tune into the television news. Audiences love them because they are visual, unusual and appealing. How many people were waiting to see whether Romeo and Juliet's eggs hatched into cygnets? Lots of them.

Why do you always hear the phrase "make it sexy" or that is a "sexy" story? It's not that the news story is about sex or intimacy; it is about stories that have a gut level, visceral edge to them that is attractive to an audience. The sexy story could make its way from a sleepy suburban weekly newspaper to morning network talk shows in a flash. It's all about hitting the news cycle at the right time.

Another lesson to be learned in the midst of a public relations campaign is that when you are presenting a story to the media, especially for television, you need to show how the average person can relate to it on an emotional level. This is especially true if you are working on an issue that has numbers that need to be communicated to the public. Numbers don't mean anything unless they can be broken down to relate to the average fami-

ly. When tax increases or tax cuts are announced, you will hear that it will cost the average taxpayer \$200 more or \$200 less next year, not that the government is cutting millions of dollars. If your audience is the general population, they just can't relate and won't relate unless the stories and numbers are humanized.

It is also important to build support and allies for your campaigns. In political campaigns, you find your supporters and they back you financially and with their votes. It is also important to build your base of support in other public relations campaigns. Find out if you have a customer who is willing to talk to the media about you or your product or to other people whom you want to influence. They will have a big impact on the success of your campaign.

Finally, how do you determine victory? In a political campaign it is quite clear, you either win or lose. Sometimes there are very close elections but most have clear winners and losers.

For public relations, the campaign victory is not as clear but it is just as sweet. There are several ways to measure your success but none is scientific. Are your messages coming through in media placements? Did your sales go up? Do you have a lot more activity on your Web site? Are there chat rooms talking about your product or issue in a positive manner?

Everyone "does" public relations every day. You just might not know it or might not call it PR. From trying to convince a babysitter to care for your child, to dealing with workers on your home, to positioning yourself for a promotion, you use public relations strategies and tactics to get these things done. If you plan ahead and keep your focus on the three main components of a public relations campaign – audience, message and medium – you can tackle any situation in life.

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