



Team Legion – Team PR



PUBLIC RELATIONS

Regardless of how public relations may be portrayed in the entertainment media, a PR practitioner does not try to manipulate others. Those who “do PR” well are not spin doctors, Pollyannas, or snake oil salesmen. They do not willfully and deliberately bend and twist the truth to suit their purposes. Unfortunately, anyone can call himself or herself a PR person, but don’t be fooled by them.

The following definition of public relations should begin to convey the nature and scope of the profession.

Public relations is the management function that evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or organization with the public interest, and plans and executes a program of action and communication to earn understanding and acceptance.

Through PR plans and the execution of those plans, public relations helps an organization manage its relationships with its publics. This involves linking organizational policies, procedures and practices with the public interest. It provides early warnings about developing issues that need to be addressed, and enhances and protects the organization’s reputation.

PR involves planning and executing programs that inform, explain, and/or persuade publics of the soundness of organizational policies and procedures. In this, as in all other PR endeavours, the organization must not only tell its publics about what a good job it is doing but also must be seen to be doing that job well.

PR plays a key role in developing an overall strategic plan to help an organization adapt to an ever-changing world. The PR plan is based on balancing the mission and vision of the organization – what it is, what it wants to be, and what it wants to do – with what the environment will allow it to do.

“It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it.”¹

Public relations provides value to an organization by:

- helping it manage its reputation and image with internal and external publics,
- providing early warning of upcoming issues and vulnerabilities,
- fostering a productive, interactive dialogue with its publics,
- ensuring key publics understand and support its mission, vision, values, and goals.

“A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to put its pants on.”

That was true in Winston Churchill’s era, and it’s true today. Whether it’s a small problem or full-blown crisis, public relations strategies are designed to help the organization respond quickly and effectively. Best of all, the trouble-shooting nature of PR can help avoid the problem in the first place.

PR is all about two-way communications. With PR, the ability to listen – to *receive* information – is as essential as the ability to *deliver* information. By seeking feedback from various publics, PR can help the organization choose proper courses of action and appropriate messages.

The ultimate goal of any PR program is to have publics accept the message and respond to it by thinking, feeling, or acting in the desired fashion. But when a message is controversial, the practitioner may have to settle for having the public at least understand what the organization is doing. Hopefully, acceptance will come later.

“If I were down to the last dollar in my marketing budget, I’d spend it on PR.”²

¹ Warren Buffet

² Bill Gates

Approaches to public relations

An organization's approach to PR can be proactive or reactive. For some organizations, the default operational mode is *reactive*. They don't act until they are faced with public criticism or a crisis, forcing PR into a firefighting role where nothing can be done until the fire starts.

Proactive PR, on the other hand, is all about fire prevention, including watching for potential flare-ups and being ready to put them out before they become infernos. It's about having plans and programs that are communications versions of smoke alarms and sprinkler systems. And it's about seeking out opportunities and using them to create good will and enhance the organization's reputation.

Four-step PR process

Public relations is not a single, linear action but rather a process – a series of actions and reactions that bring about a desired outcome/result.

1. Define the problem or opportunity
2. Plan and program
3. Take action and communicate
4. Evaluate

Step 1: Define the problem or opportunity

Begin by studying the situation – the problem to be solved or the opportunity to be developed. Review relevant information on the organization itself – its history, policies, procedures, accomplishments, failures, etc. Study the issue(s), gather information on the organization's publics, and probe and monitor their knowledge, opinions, attitudes and behaviours. Research the effectiveness of various channels of communication, and, often, prepare a situation analysis that summarizes what is known about the situation. Take the organization's aspirational and sustaining goals into account. Every organization has goals and often they form a hierarchy where each nests into another. This sequencing can set up a stairway with short-term goals that proceed to medium-term ones and culminate in long-term goals.

Step 2: Plan and program

Using information gathered during the first step, establish goals, set specific and measurable objectives, select target audiences, create message and action strategies and tactics, choose communication channels, and establish evaluation mechanisms.

Goals

Every PR plan starts with a goal, and it must be appropriate for the publics selected in step one of the process. A project-specific goal should relate to at least one overall organizational goal. To set your goal, look at what you want to accomplish. In other words, if everything works out according to plan, what will be the result?

Objectives

Outcome objectives are more specific than goals. They specify the result sought with a specific audience. Generally, an outcome will be one or more of the following:

- the message is *received* by the target audience
- the message is *understood* by the target audience
- the message is *accepted* by the target audience
- the target audience's *opinion* is formed, reinforced, or changed by the message
- the target audience's *attitude* is formed, reinforced, or changed by the message
- the target audience's *behaviour* is established, modified, changed, or maintained by the message

You also can set *output objectives* to measure how successful you were during the planning and implementation stage of your program. By evaluating what you did, you can uncover reasons why you met or did not meet your objective(s) and make changes to your next plan. What is key, however, is that output objectives are not substitutes for outcome objectives. Holding an event, for example, is not a desired outcome. Having 10 new members join the organization at the event is.

Stakeholders, publics and audiences

An organization's *stakeholders* are those individuals or groups who have a stake in the organization. They can affect or be affected by the organization's actions, policies, and procedures. Stakeholders also can affect the organization in different ways. Some can have a significant impact on the organization's ability to thrive – even survive – while the influence of others is minimal.

Publics are individuals or groups of people from various stakeholder groups who can be defined in a common way, i.e., customers, voters, members, etc. Publics can form when an organization determines it wants or needs something from a specific group or they may form themselves based on their interest in issues surrounding an organization. Whether they view the organization positively or negatively, they can be classified as active or passive.

Audiences, quite simply, are those to whom you direct a specific message or messages. Audiences can include several publics, and are often defined demographically (age, gender, income, etc.) or psychographically (attitudes, values, interests, etc.).

Within these targeted groups are two types of information seekers: active and passive. *Active* information seekers will spend time gathering facts and opinions. Because they already are interested in the issue, they often don't wait for the organization to send information and may seek it out from other sources. As they search, they both speak and listen, communicating with the organization and/or among themselves.

Passive information seekers, on the other hand, have a low level of interest in the issue. Some may become active if and when the organization engages with them, while others can move from passive to active and back again. Since all publics and audiences contain both types, the key often is to determine where the majority sits.

Also in the mix are *latent* publics. Sometimes categorized as nonpublics, they have no interest in the issue or organization. However, they can potentially, and sometimes quickly, become active in a positive or negative way. If they don't like what they're seeing or hearing, they may grumble on social media or even join an activist group working against the organization. If they decide to support you, they can become valuable allies.

Strategies and tactics

The strategy is the means – the overall concept, approach, or general plan – for reaching a goal or objective. The tactics are the how-to's – the ways to implement a strategy to reach those whose support will help or whose opposition will hinder the success of your plan. Most projects include action, message, and media strategies.

Action strategies and tactics

The four main types of PR actions are activities, events, campaigns and programs. But PR plans can be affected by organizational actions – something the organization has done, is doing, or plans to do. PR action also may be needed when someone in the organization makes an inappropriate or offensive remark. In this case, the remark can become an "event" itself.

Your actions – the things your organization does – must demonstrate that you are as concerned with the needs of your stakeholders as you are with your organization's needs and well being. PR actions and messages go hand in hand. Your actions must back up your messages and vice versa. And if outside factors force you to undertake an action that will not be popular with your audiences, your message will be key to at least helping them understand the circumstances that brought this about.

It may be a cliché but actions speak louder than words

Organizational actions can contradict messaging. A message of "we care" won't be credible if, for example, someone who deals with the public is cold and seemingly uncaring.

Message strategies and tactics

When planning your communications strategies and tactics, start with a clear idea of the result you are seeking. In other words, when all is said and done, what do you want audiences to learn, believe or do? Find out everything you can about your audiences at this stage because messages can't be created until you have that information. Consider the following.

- Make sure your messages speak to the audience's self-interest. In other words, identify and use an audience benefit that answers the question: What's in it for me?
- Be prepared to relate to your audience's values, talk their language, and meet their needs.
- Determine how you can tailor each message to a specific audience. Make sure there are no contradictions between what you tell one audience and what you convey to another.

Message received versus message sent

Another thing to think about before you begin is the need to focus more on *message outcomes* than messages sent. In other words, concentrate less on what you want to say and more on what you want your audience to *hear*.

Nonverbal messages

Pay attention to colours, fonts, body language, visuals, voice tone, and all the other nonverbal elements that can help make your message powerful and memorable.

A dynamic symbol can become instantly recognizable. It can capture attention and communicate the essence of the message and/or character of the organization. You also must be on the lookout for symbols that can damage you. One example of this is the image of oil-slicked waterfowl that plagued Exxon long, long after the Valdez spill.

Message sources

- The source of a message, whether it's the organization itself or a third party, can help determine whether or not an audience accepts the message.
- When you enlist an outside individual or group to pass on or deliver your message to their audiences, it gets to receivers via a trusted third party. Those opinion leaders are seen as sources, and their credibility can enhance your message.
- When you, as a spokesperson, personally deliver a message, the audience's feelings about you will reflect on the organization as well.
- Source credibility, including the source's status, knowledge, perceived impartiality, reputation, image, and/or popularity can enhance message credibility. Note, however, that not all sources are credible with everyone. To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, a specific source can be credible with some of the audience all of the time or all of the audience some of the time, but it's difficult if not impossible to be credible with all of the audiences all of the time.

If you send a news release to a daily newspaper and the information is used in a story or column, the newspaper or the columnist may be seen as the source. Note that when you are communicating to your audiences via earned media, the gatekeepers themselves are not audiences. The only time they could be characterized this way is through any attempt to form, reinforce, or change their perceptions of your organization.

Message context

Your message strategy may revolve around putting the message in a suitable context. We know that the same message may be received differently if it is delivered by stopping people on the street, stopping by their homes, putting it beside a highway or posting it on the information highway. So look around at what else is going on in the environment. For example, a message on health care may be more effective if it's delivered in a brochure in a doctor's office.

Messages and media

While life would be a lot easier if all audiences consisted of either active or passive information seekers, each has a mix of both. The secret is to determine whether one dominates.

Reaching active and passive audiences

Reaching passive audiences is a lot like fishing. You must capture their attention immediately and whet their appetites by putting a juicy worm at the end of your hook. Passive audiences go for juicy messages – those with style and creativity. They can be enticed with appealing visuals and catchy slogans, so T-shirts, buttons, and posters may be ideal for them. Active information seekers are ready to be hauled in, but before you can do that, you must put your line in the water and bait it with in-depth information sent via such channels as papers, magazine articles, and videotape presentations.

Regardless of audience composition, you should cover all bases by creating tailored messages. Choose the communications channels each audience finds most credible and useful, and use different media (owned and earned) to reach audiences. Employ a mix of vehicles such as news releases, tweets, posters, and blogs.

Social media influencers play a key role in jumpstarting word-of-mouth communications.

Word of mouth describes how information and opinions are passed on in an informal, person-to-person manner. Much word of mouth is based on the person's experience, on what he/she learned from a trusted friend or respected opinion leader, or on something heard on TV, seen on Facebook or read in a magazine.

Message timing

A message must be delivered at a time that is most appropriate and meaningful to your audiences. Try to take advantage of natural links to use as hooks for your messages. Can you find a link to a holiday or observance? If an ally or an opponent is planning a campaign for a specific time, can you hop on or effectively refute it? Could a major event such as an election preoccupy or engage your audiences and/or the mass media? Are there seasonal implications? Are there any associated anniversaries – internal or external – on the horizon? Can you follow on the heels of a widely publicized news story that makes your message content even more relevant?

Step 3: Take action and communicate

Implement the program planned in the previous step. Prepare and send messages, hold events, and run campaigns or programs.

Write for your audience

When we communicate with our grandmother and our boss, we give them the same basic information, but we use different words and may edit some details. It's the same thing with the organization's audiences. In some cases, several audiences will receive exactly the same message via the same media, but in other cases, the messages are different. Not contradictory but different. The content may be very similar, but perhaps one point is more strongly emphasized with one audience than with another. Different words may also be used to accommodate different education levels, and different symbols may be chosen to appeal to different age or cultural groups. Your messages should be tailored for each audience yet they must share a common theme and communicate the same information.

Prepare core and key messages

A *core message* is the message that reflects why an organization exists. It's clear, simple and short, it relates to your mission, and it's sufficiently broad to allow you to create more specific key messages that define what you do as an organization to fulfill your mandate. *Key messages* "go" with the core message but are more specific.

Add proof points to your key messages

To help make your key messages credible, make sure each is accompanied by at least one proof point. In other words, back up your information with evidence (facts, figures, examples, etc.) that substantiates your message. For example, if an organization's message point is that it is an innovator in its field, one proof point could be the 2016 industry award it won for innovation. Another may be the number of innovative products/services released over a specific period of time. Often, it is one or more proof points that give the news release its newsworthiness.

Communications tips

Start at the end – Don't write ANYTHING – not one word – until you're clear about what you want the piece to accomplish. Start with results and you'll end with success.

Learn to tell stories – As children, we loved being told stories. Guess what? As adults, we still love stories. So, wherever and whenever possible, deliver your information in the form of a story with an interesting and captivating beginning, a meaty middle, and a strong ending.

Use repetition and consistency – Very few in your audience actually hear your message the first time. So you need to repeat it again and again using the same or similar language.

Use the multi-step flow process where necessary – Sometimes third-party credibility will take your message further, so consider testimonials, endorsements, and external partners to help communicate your message.

Follow the four Cs – Public relations writing must be clear, concise, correct, and complete.

Be creative – Make your copy sing and your quotes sparkle by using analogies, examples, and anecdotes. And make good use of similes, metaphors, and other figures of speech.

Be credible – Surveys continue to show that spokespeople perceived as caring (number one quality), honest, open, dedicated, professional, and competent are the most credible. So show you care. Express feelings (happiness, sadness, regret, dismay, etc.) directly or indirectly then go on to provide evidence of your point of view, i.e., facts and figures. For example, when Ontario's community colleges got together for a campaign entitled "Fund Colleges Now," the communications people could have crafted the following quote based on the *FEELINGS–FACTS–FIGURES* model:

We are dismayed by the lack of funding allocated to Ontario's community colleges. (FEELING)
Canada needs greater numbers of skilled workers to remain competitive internationally. (FACT)
But Ontario is 10th of the 10 provinces in per-student revenues allocated to colleges. (FIGURE)

Step 4: Evaluate

The final step in the process sees the practitioner evaluating the entire effort. He/she first does research to find out whether or not the objective(s) has/have been reached. Because this step provides information that can be used in other PR efforts, the practitioner also evaluates the work done when preparing for the activity as well as his/her success in implementation.

MEDIA RELATIONS

“The media is like the rain. You can complain about the rain or you can get an umbrella and try to be as dry as you can.”³

Definition of news

One of the many definitions of *news* is “a timely report on an event or situation that is important, relevant, and/or interesting to a considerable number of people.” It’s also information on an event or situation that is out of the ordinary. In 1880, the editor of the *New York Sun* wrote: “When a dog bites a man that is not news, but when a man bites a dog – that is news.”

News values

On any given day, thousands of stories compete for space or time in the news media. Each day, new products are introduced, books are published, government bills pass through various stages, wars are waged, scientific discoveries are made, babies or puppies are rescued from danger, the stock market rises or falls, teams play games, and prominent folks say things that are either profound or incredibly stupid. How does the media choose from among them? Generally, they evaluate the information based on its newsworthiness. And the factors that determine the newsworthiness of events and situations, called *news values*, are:

Impact – Information about events/situations that are likely to affect many people.

Timeliness – Information about events/situations that is appropriate to the audience at the time it is printed or aired. (Timeliness is not sufficiently important to stand alone, i.e., if all the information has going for it is that it is timely, it probably won’t be used.) The timeliness may refer to *seasonableness*, i.e., it’s timely because it’s relevant to a season (spring) or an observance (Mental Health Week). An anniversary can also make information timely. A 10th, 50th, or 100th anniversary can invest a story on that organization with newsworthiness.

Prominence – Information about events/situations involving well-known persons or institutions.

Proximity – Information on events/situations occurring in the area covered by a particular medium or that hit “close to home” geographically or psychologically.

Human interest – Information on events/situations that often touch emotions.

Unusualness – Information on events/situations that deviate sharply from the expected or the ordinary.

Interest – Information about events/situations that are likely to interest many people.

Some stories are discounted immediately because they simply are not newsworthy to any media. Others lose out because they are not newsworthy to an individual media outlet. Some are newsworthy for print but not for broadcast media, while others are of interest to local but not national media, and vice versa. Some are newsworthy for one community but not others, and some would be welcomed only by media that specialize in one area such as sports or entertainment.

A story may not be particularly newsworthy on its own, but when it is viewed in context with other stories of the day, it may be chosen. Some information may be worthy of coverage, but there’s only so much time and space available and it loses out to more compelling stories. And sometimes a story almost makes it into the media only to lose its space or time to an important breaking story.

When information about an organization, person, issue, or cause is judged to be newsworthy, and that information is printed or aired, it becomes publicity a.k.a., *earned media*. From a PR perspective, publicity can be spontaneous or planned. *Planned publicity* is the result of a conscious effort to attract attention to an issue, event, or organization. *Spontaneous publicity* often is generated by an unplanned event or crisis, by the media itself through investigative journalism, or as part of the journalists’ regular story-writing

³ Peter Donolo, communications strategist

process. However it came to be, the journalist may be eager to find out the causes, circumstances, who is involved, etc. So while the organization did not seek the publicity, you must respond to media inquiries. Because no payment to the media is involved, people often speak of “free publicity.” This is inaccurate because although the mass media receives no payment, it can cost the organization money – in staff time and materials – to obtain publicity. Also, if publicity isn’t free, it isn’t publicity.

Publicity points to remember

- Publicity cannot stand alone. The organization must be equally credible and honest.
- Once you draw media attention to your organization, everything about it – negative as well as positive – becomes newsworthy in the journalist’s eye.
- By itself, publicity will not sell goods, raise funds for a charitable cause, or win elections. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself.
- Publicity can introduce a message into the word-of-mouth communications web.
- Much of the publicity an organization receives is beyond its control.
- Publicity disseminated is not equivalent to messages received. A mention in the news media does not mean that your publics have received, understood or accepted it or that they are ready to act upon it.
- Not all PR activities result in publicity – nor should they.

Publicity and advertising – the differences

“Advertising is saying you’re good. Publicity is getting someone else to say you’re good.” ⁴

Unlike advertising – paid media – there’s no charge for publicity. Because an advertisement is almost always broadcast or printed exactly as the purchaser has prepared it, advertising is a controlled method of placing messages in the media. Publicity may be changed or not used at all, making publicity an uncontrolled method. The advertiser deals with the advertising department while the publicist most often deals with the news department.

Never refer to news coverage as “free advertising.” Traditional media cannot survive without advertising, so claiming to have received it for free sounds as if you feel you’ve scammed them somehow. Even more importantly perhaps, using that term is like holding up a sign saying, “I don’t know how the media works.”

“Advertising is what you pay for – publicity is what you pray for.” ⁵

Media relations guidelines

Earn media coverage by practicing effective media relations. It involves setting up and maintaining a professional and mutually beneficial working relationship with news gatherers and gatekeepers, in part by becoming known as a credible source and as a provider of factual, expert information whether or not that information results in media coverage.

1. Be honest and up front

When you communicate with your publics through the mass media, be aware that the key to effective media relations is to be a reliable source with a track record for accuracy, integrity and performance.

Don’t lie, evade or mislead

Don’t evade questions or attempt to mislead reporters, not only because this is dishonest, but also because doing so can make reporters question everything you say. Most do research before they approach you for information, so any lie or omission probably will be caught. Most also are great observers who can read body language that may signal dishonesty. And don’t try to evade a reporter’s question. If you can’t answer it, say so and explain why. If you don’t know the answer, say so, offer to find out, and say you’ll get it to him/her within a specific period of time. Then do so.

⁴ Jean-Louis Gassée, former Apple Computer business executive

⁵ Unknown

Don't play favourites

Don't favour one news outlet or reporter over others by giving one an important news story and not giving it to others. That's unfair not only to the outlet but also to its audience. On the other hand, if a reporter comes up with a story idea, don't call a news conference and tell everyone else about it.

Respect the public

Be as cooperative in sharing bad news as you are with good news. What an organization does can affect a good many people in the community, and these people have a right to honest reports about an organization's activities.

Don't try to "buy" the media

Don't send reporters expensive gifts, and take it easy on freebies and refreshments. Many news outlets will refuse or return even small gimmicks such as key chains, T-shirts, and mugs.

2. Be a reliable source of information

Give reporters the interesting and timely stories and pictures they want, when they want them, and in the form in which they can easily use them.

Be aware of deadlines and lead times

Know media deadlines. Be aware of how lead times vary from media to media. For example, a magazine may have a lead time of six months, while a radio station may need it today.

Make spokespeople available

If the journalist can't reach someone at your organization, the story either may not run or may run without any input from you. Provide contact info (names, phone numbers/email addresses) on your media web page.

Respond quickly to media enquires and requests

When a reporter contacts you, respond as promptly as possible. If you can't do so immediately, call or email to acknowledge the request and say you are working on it and will get back her/him ASAP.

Answer questions

When it comes to answering questions, there are only three acceptable responses:

- 1) Here it is.
- 2) I don't know but I'll find out for you, and,
- 3) I know but I can't tell you now because ...

A "no comment" is not one of the three alternatives. Nor is speaking to reporters "off the record." Even if you stipulate that you are providing information as background to help the reporter understand an event or situation, there's no guarantee it won't be published or aired. Dealing with reporters on a not-for-attribution basis also can be dangerous.

Set up a web media page or online media centre

Use it to post news releases and other materials relevant to the news media, including organizational backgrounders, key personnel bios, organizational and event fact sheets, calendars of events, photographs, and graphics. Reporters can visit the site to do research on the organization, check for breaking news stories, and obtain links to the organization's blog, Twitter account or Facebook page. Include contact information with email addresses and, possibly, phone numbers. Let reporters know about the online site by including its URL on all news and publicity materials you send out.

Post downloadable photos along with advance permission to use them. (A photograph not only increases the amount of space devoted to your story but also assists with reader retention.) Clearly labeled PDF or TIFF files with a minimum of 300 dpi will meet most media requirements.

3. Don't beg or complain

Selecting the news is the media's job, so don't beg to have your stories used. It implies that your stuff isn't newsworthy in itself. And don't complain – about story treatment, placement, or information selected for the story. If you have a good reason to be upset – a fact is incorrect, you were misquoted, etc. – don't automatically fire off an angry or insulting letter to the editor.

If there's an error, you may want to ask for a correction if it meets at least four of these criteria:

1. The wrong caused substantial damage to the organization and its brand.
2. You responded promptly and accurately to media questions that led to the story.
3. The correction will not give more visibility to original story.
4. The correction merits restating the problem, including the error.
5. You can reach the same audience that saw the error.
6. You won't look like a nitpicker.

How to obtain a correction – options

- Talk to the reporter.
- Write to the reporter and/or the department editor asking for a correction. Send any necessary documents that prove incorrect facts were used. Do this only when the error can have a severe impact on your organization.
- Write a letter and email it to the appropriate editorial page editor, asking for an opportunity to respond to the errors.

How to avoid errors in the first place

Reporters do take notes, but they're not secretaries, so assume human fallibility. They also may be unfamiliar with your organization, so provide links to any relevant information. Another way to avoid the potential for media errors is to develop the skill of active listening. When you're being interviewed – formally or just having a chat with a reporter – listen carefully to each question so you can supply an appropriate and relevant answer. Your response will be used – not the reporter's extrapolation of what you would have said had you actually responded to the question.

Don't interfere with the editorial process

Don't ask to check the story before it's printed or goes to air. Don't ask when or whether it will run unless you know the reporter well or he/she has approached you for the story. Don't ask for clippings or tear sheets or tapes. If you want them, hire a clipping or transcript service.

You also have no right to ask the news media to suppress or kill a story. It's asking journalists to betray their trust. The only way to keep unfavourable stories out of the media is to keep situations that produce them from taking place.

Don't get into a fight with the news media

Remember the old saying: You can't win a fight with an organization that buys ink by the barrel. You risk not only looking foolish in the reporter's and your public's eyes. Even worse, your reaction can be the news.

Show you understand how the media works

Columnists are paid to provide their opinions. So if one of them criticizes you, don't make the situation worse by overreacting. If incorrect facts were used, that's a different story. But be aware your angry comments could be a topic for the next column.

Provide television with visuals or ideas for visuals. And remember that many radio stations run very brief (two minutes or less) newscasts so match the content of your story with the radio station (audience demographics and format). Follow news style (CP or BN) whenever possible

Say "thanks" when relevant

If a reporter goes beyond the call of duty to help you out, a thank you is appropriate. If she/he does an excellent job on a story, a compliment is in order.

Remember the four Fs

Be fast, fair, frank, and friendly. Be fast in getting back to a reporter who calls. Be fair and share hard news with all reporters. Be frank: honest and upfront and as willing to share bad news as good. Be friendly – snarkiness will get you nowhere fast – but don't fawn. It sends the wrong message about your relationship.

4. Use tried-and-true earned media strategies and tactics

Provide new executives with media training

Media training helps executives better deliver organizational messages and helps them feel more comfortable when dealing with media. It allows them to practice their delivery and pay attention to any nonverbal messages they may be sending through voice tone and body language.

Provide local angles and contact information

When you send a national news release, consider also pitching it to relevant provincial or city media, especially if there's a local angle. It could be local statistics or even the name of someone there the reporter can interview.

Prepare reaction statements to major news stories

When a story on an issue or situation that could affect your organization in a positive or negative way becomes part of the news cycle, prepare a reaction statement.

Think people and stories

Tell stories about people. Don't just talk in general all the time about your organization. Get quotes from people who benefit from your product or service and permission to use them in articles and news stories. These real people may be customers, members, staff, executives, or friends.

Hold a media event

When you announce major organizational news, consider gathering reporters in one spot for a news conference so they can ask questions and get the answers they need for their stories. Other options include a:

- **media availability** – making a spokesperson available for interviews on a specific date and at a set time. If the interviews are to be done face to face, choose a particular location.
- **media briefing** – a session designed to provide background information or explanation rather than spot news to interested media representatives.
- **media preview or showing** – a special showing of a new "product" prior to general availability or public release.
- **photo opportunity** – setting up an opportunity for the media to obtain photographs or video footage of a newsworthy person or an interesting happening. A stunt is a photo op on steroids and can be very effective. Great care should be taken when planning one though.

Reach out to media

Attract media attention, and hopefully, earn coverage in a more creative way. Consider these options:

- **media drop** – arranging to have a spokesperson or other representative "drop in" on media to "drop off" event invitations, a creative publicity prop, or other materials they can use to cover a story.
- **media participation** – Invite specific media to be part of an event by providing prizes and media celebrities. Note: do not use this tactic for major news events as it would limit the presence of those outlets not participating.
- **visit to an editorial board** – meeting with a newspaper or magazine editorial board to offer insight into organizational policies and procedures or your positions on current and important issues. These meetings often are held to educate and enlighten gatekeepers, but be aware that a misstep could result in negative coverage.

Pitch and accept media interviews

An engaging spokesperson who can address issues with to-the-point information that is easy to understand can be the difference between getting your critical messages covered or ignored. It can mean the difference between improving or damaging the organization's reputation. Before the interview takes place, make sure you are familiar with your talking points and/or the message and proof points. But whatever you do, don't memorize your lines. You'll come across sounding stilted or programmed. And don't throw in key messages just to get them out. To be credible, you must appear and sound natural.

Be prepared to think on your feet if, for example, the interviewer wanders off the subject you want to talk about, asks a questions by making a negative comment about your organization, or makes an unfair assumption. A level headed yet effective response technique follows this sequence:

Acknowledgement – bridge – key fact – key message

First, acknowledge the question by answering it. If it is negative or irrelevant, simply say "yes" or "no." Whatever you do, do not repeat any negative words used by the interviewer. Once you have acknowledged the question, use a bridge to get back on topic.

Examples of acknowledge/bridging statements:

- "No. In fact, the issue is more complex than that. Let me explain."
- "That's true to an extent, but the important thing to consider is ..."

After the bridge, provide a fact or statistic that gets you back on message. Then deliver a proof point – evidence that supports what you are saying. The key is to truly listen to the questions and acknowledge them with answers. Some interviewees seem to come to interviews with pat answers to give no matter what the question is. This is what the media regards as "spin," and it is inexcusable.

Preparing for tough questions

A question about an organizational practice that has come under fire does not mean the interviewer is against you. It's her/his job to ask tough questions on behalf of the public, and it's the spokesperson's job to provide the honest answers the public deserves.

One of the best ways to prepare someone for tough questions is to ask: "So, what questions don't you want to answer and how are you going to answer them when they come up?" Pose them to your spokesperson until he/she is comfortable with her/his answers. Here are some other tips. If you don't know the answer to a question, simply say, "I don't know, but I'll find out and get back to you right away." What if you don't understand the question? *Solution:* Ask the reporter for clarification. Never take a stab at it. And what if an answer calls for speculation? *Solution:* "I don't want to speculate."

Distinguish between misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation is false, but the person disseminating it believes it to be true. Disinformation is false, and the person disseminating it knows it is false but puts it out there deliberately.

Media interview tips

- If you don't want to be quoted - don't say it.
- Be brief and to the point.
- When doing a broadcast interview, pause before answering a question. It tells the audience you are giving the question serious consideration.
- Avoid acronyms and jargon the public won't understand.
- Don't offer personal opinions while wearing your company hat. Be apolitical.
- Don't just say "no comment." Explain *why* you can't comment.
- Consider your body language. It can confirm or contradict what you are saying.
- Don't be forced into "yes" or "no" answers to complex or loaded questions.
- Don't let an interviewer throw you with silence.
- Don't lose your cool. Be pleasant even if the reporter isn't.
- "Remember: the questions don't do damage, only the answers do." ⁶

⁶ Sam Donaldson, former American TV reporter

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS, EMERGENCIES AND CRISES

Negative coverage in traditional media, snarky comments on social media, offensive accusations by groups that oppose your organization, and nasty rumors all can create headaches and challenges.

According to crisis expert Shel Holtz, an organization experiencing a full-blown crisis goes through seven stages. Even when lesser problems arise, an unprepared organization may undergo some of all of them as well.

7 crisis stages

- Surprise
- Actions (often, unfortunately, based on insufficient or incorrect information)
- Loss of control
- Intense scrutiny from outside publics and/or media
- A siege mentality
- Panic
- Short-term focus

Dealing with self-inflicted problems and external rumours

The solution is to set up an internal early-warning system so you can be alerted when there's a potential problem. Once you've been informed of the situation, here's how you deal with it:

- Identify the problem and investigate it.
- Determine the nature and scope of the problem and what, if anything, has been done to solve it.
- Analyze the problem's potential to cause harm and the extent of the harm it could cause.
- Craft a response to negative comments, explaining what you are doing to solve the problem. If necessary, take responsibility and apologize for any harm done.
- Respond where and when appropriate.
- Monitor how the response is being received and make any necessary adjustment.

Rumours

When a rumour is reported or shared, it can damage an organization's brand and overall reputation.

Rumours validate the worldview of those who already believe them or who dislike the organization and are open to accepting any rumour as truth, no matter how outrageous it may seem. As one social psychologist points out, if you believe in Satan, you're likely to welcome a rumour that he's alive and well and running an organization in Akron, Ohio.

General guidelines for combatting rumours:

1. Analyze the nature and impact of the rumour before taking corrective action.
2. Compile complete, authentic information that will refute the rumour.
3. When denying a rumour, avoid repeating it more than necessary.
4. Use credible third parties to help refute the rumour.

Problem-solving guidelines

When a problem has been caused by actions taken or words spoken by someone within the organization, heed this advice from an experienced crisis manager.

- **Do not ignore or underestimate the problem.** Respond quickly and truthfully or others will control the situation.
- **Take responsibility.** This is not the same as accepting blame. If the fallout is directed at your brand, it doesn't matter if someone in another part of your organization caused the problem. Your "name" is on

it so people want to know what you're going to do about it. And people want you to accept responsibility, whether you're actually to blame for it or not.

- **Avoid a knee-jerk reaction.** Don't make the situation worse make it worse by overreacting. Your defensiveness and anger can make things worse.
- **Find allies and credible third parties.** "Recruit and use third parties to speak on your behalf. it is very important to have other people, hopefully friends, saying the things you want to say about yourself. They are more credible than you are at this point."⁷
- **Solve the problem and let everyone know how it has been solved.** Provide information on the steps you've taken to resolve it.
- **If you must respond to and through media, do not be adversarial.** Her advice: "Treat the media as conduits, not enemies. Realize that they have a job to do. You can do one of two things. You can hunker in the bunker and let them use other sources – hostile third parties, people with axes to grind, bones to pick, people who have an interest in giving you trouble – or you can deal forthrightly with the media yourself. We advise the latter."
- **Remember that caring is a big part of credibility.** "Demonstrate concern, care and empathy. You want to be sympathetic. You want to empathize. People will not listen to your rational arguments about what happened and why it happened until you get past the motion of the moment. And the way to do this is to empathize with the people who have been affected."

"Next to doing the right thing, the most important thing is to let people know you are doing the right thing."⁸

Problem-solving communications tips

- Avoid comparisons, i.e., "This isn't Bhopal." Don't give anyone the opportunity to link your problem with a bigger one.
- Don't say "no comment." It sounds as if you're concealing something. If there's a legitimate reason why you can't comment, say so.
- Don't speculate. Limit your statements to facts.
- Don't comment off the cuff. Stick with the facts you know.
- Don't, in the heat of the moment, try to place blame on someone or something else. The truth will come out.
- Distinguish between trained journalists and so-called "citizen journalists." Unlike reporters from mainstream media, most of whom have journalism training and a respect for journalism's code of ethics, some of these citizen journalists may have neither. So before you respond to negative stories on their sites, check them out.
- Create key messages (with proof points) that are, as Polak advises, simple and compelling and easily applied to all facets of the situation. Use her CAP formula:

Concern	Action	Perspective
75%	20%	5%

- Realize that symbols can be your worst enemy during a crisis.

"In a communications age, where video images can sear instant, lasting impressions into the public consciousness, the company that fails to understand how the image-making machinery works may live to regret it."⁹

⁷ Jo-Anne Polak

⁸ John De. Rockefeller

⁹ Thomas K. Grose, media analyst

STRATEGIC PR PLANNING

Nature of situation – the problem(s) and/or opportunity/opportunities:

(Summarize what your situation analysis has told you about the situation)

What the source of concern is or the nature of the opportunity/opportunities:

Where it is a problem or opportunity:

When it is a problem or opportunity:

Who is involved or affected (stakeholders):

How they are involved or affected:

Why this is important to the organization and its stakeholders:

SWOT analysis:

(This is an analysis of the organization’s strengths and weaknesses relevant to the program, campaign, or project being planned. It examines the opportunities and threats in the environment at the time the program, campaign, or project will be implemented.)

Organization’s strengths

Organization’s weaknesses

External opportunities

External threats

Focus statement:

(The focus statement is based on the points above. It focuses on the problems to be resolved and/or opportunities to be developed as well as on internal and external factors – social, political, organizational – that could affect the situation. It summarizes key strengths and weaknesses and identifies key opportunities and threats. Often, it includes a benchmark to be used for planning and evaluation purposes.)

Resources:

(Resources available to execute a PR project)

Funds/budget: \$ _____ Personnel: _____

Physical resources – e.g., rooms, furniture: _____ Controlled communication vehicle(s): _____

Proposed PR project – event, program, campaign:

(What you are you planning to do, e.g., special event, awareness program, fundraising or publicity campaign, etc.)

Allies & opponents:

(Those on your side and those who might be hostile)

Potential support – Allies

Hostile – Opponents

Purpose of project – goal:

(Organizational goal(s) your PR project can help reach)

Project publics:

(Key publics from the stakeholders identified in step one.)

Ranking of project publics:

(Publics ranked in order of importance to your project. Criteria: How important is each to your PR plans? Which can you realistically expect to be able to reach with the resources – time, money, personnel – that you have available?)

Primary: _____

Secondary: _____

Tertiary: _____



Organization's and publics' needs, concerns, and interests:

Organizational needs, concerns, interests:

Publics' needs, concerns, interests:

Desired results:

(For each key public identified, what are the desired results or outcomes? What would you like each to know, to feel and/or to do?)

<u>Publics</u>	<u>Knowledge</u>	<u>Attitude</u>	<u>Behaviour</u>
1. _____	1. _____	1. _____	1. _____
2. _____	2. _____	2. _____	2. _____
3. _____	3. _____	3. _____	3. _____

Objectives and publics

(Based on the results you are seeking, what are your objectives with each of your publics– primary, secondary, etc. Remember – objectives start with the word “to” followed by an accomplishment verb, specify a single outcome with each public, and include a target date for accomplishment.)

<u>Publics</u>	<u>Objectives</u>
1. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____
2. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____
3. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Messages sent:

(What messages will you send to your target audiences and intervening audiences such as their opinion leaders? What can be said about the issue that will communicate your position or point of view and respond to your publics' needs and concerns?)

<u>Publics:</u>	<u>Intervening audiences:</u>	<u>Messages:</u>
1. _____	1. _____	1. _____
	2. _____	2. _____
2. _____	1. _____	1. _____
	2. _____	2. _____
3. _____	1. _____	1. _____
	2. _____	2. _____

Audience analysis:

(Who your audiences are: Demographics and psychographics. What are their habits and where can you reach them?)

Strategy selection:

(What you can do to reach your objective(s) and communicate your message(s) to each of your audiences.)

<u>Audiences:</u>	<u>Objective:</u>	<u>Messages:</u>	<u>Strategies:</u>
1. _____	1. _____	1. _____	1. _____
	2. _____	2. _____	2. _____
2. _____	1. _____	1. _____	1. _____
	2. _____	2. _____	2. _____
3. _____	1. _____	1. _____	1. _____
	2. _____	2. _____	2. _____

Messages received

(When what you do, what you say and how you say it, and who says it all come together, what messages do you want your publics to receive?)

Targeted publics:

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Messages received:

Other publics listening/observing:

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____

Messages received:

Intervening publics:

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Messages received:

Tactics:

(How you will carry out each strategy. For example, details on how to deliver your message(s) to your audiences. Who will deliver the message, in what context, and what channel will you use)

Source: *(Who is the best person to send the message – CEO, celebrity, opinion leader, person affected, etc.?)*

Context: *(What is/are the proper environment(s) – media, social media, compatible places – in which to place the message(s)?)*

Channel: *(What is/are the most effective channel(s) to deliver the message)*

Channels available:	
Face-to-face communications (most credible)	Traditional and online news media
Personal communications	Nonpersonal mass communications
Social media communications	Advertising media communications

<u>Audiences:</u>	<u>Messages:</u>	<u>Source:</u>	<u>Context:</u>	<u>Channels:</u>
1. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____
2. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____
3. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Strategies and tactics:

(Your strategies – the overall plan of action – with specific methods and actions to execute them.)

Audiences:

Objectives:

Strategies:

Tactics:

_____	_____	1. _____	1. _____
			2. _____
			3. _____
			4. _____
			5. _____
_____	_____	2. _____	1. _____
			2. _____
			3. _____
			4. _____
			5. _____
_____	_____	3. _____	1. _____
			2. _____
			3. _____
			4. _____
			5. _____
_____	_____	4. _____	1. _____
			2. _____
			3. _____
			4. _____
			5. _____

Evaluation mechanisms

(Recommend a mechanism to evaluate whether or not your objectives – SMART – were met.)

Sample evaluation techniques:

- a) Counting (money, heads, telephone calls, purchases, etc.)
- b) Survey (attitudes, knowledge, etc.)
- c) Focus group (attitudes, knowledge, etc.)
- d) Poll (knowledge)
- e) Audit
- f) Content analysis
- g) Readership study
- h) Interview

Recommended evaluation mechanism(s):

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Evaluation by objectives:

Objectives:

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Evaluation mechanism(s):

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 1. _____
- 2. _____



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