



## *Everybody's Business*

*No matter what its size, an organization must attract a degree of support from the public. So every organization has public relations, whether it has an active policy or not. Here is a look at public relations, taking in both practices and principles. Principle Number One: Tell the truth . . .*

□ Few terms in the modern vocabulary are more difficult to define than public relations. For many years, in fact, dictionaries did not define it at all. The first attempt to declare a standard meaning for this familiar pursuit was made in the Second Edition of Webster's New International Dictionary in 1949, with the assistance and approval of the Public Relations Society of America. Its primary definition was: "The activities of an industry, union, corporation, profession, government or other organization in building and maintaining sound and productive relations with special publics such as customers, employees and shareholders, and the public at large, so as to adapt itself to its environment and interpret itself to society."

This statement stands more or less intact in dictionaries today. While it is a commendable effort to say something that needs to be said, it is not quite satisfactory. For one thing, the emphasis it places on industries, corporations and the rest leaves us with the erroneous impression that public relations activities may only be undertaken by large-scale entities. It also suggests that P.R. activities are necessarily aggressive. It ignores the passive reputation of an organization, which, like the reputation of an individual, is based on how it behaves towards human beings.

Webster's goes on to say that public relations is "the state of such activities, or the degree of their success, in furthering public understanding of an organization's economic and social adjustment: as good or bad public relations". Here again, we can sense a losing struggle behind these carefully-chosen words. They imply a score-oriented game

dissimulation — of explaining away an organization's actions regardless of the motives behind them. ". . . An organization's economic and social adjustment" may be made for purely selfish reasons, and run counter to public standards of responsible behaviour. Unfortunately for the organization, the public may understand what it is up to only too well.

The meaning of public relations clearly goes beyond these semantical gropings, and it continues to elude even veteran public relations practitioners. This partly explains why they almost invariably describe their field of endeavour in negative terms. They can always tell you firmly what it is not; when it comes to saying what it *is*, they are far less positive. One reason for their backward approach is that misconceptions about the subject abound.

The first thing most public relations professionals will tell you — and with some vehemence — is that their job is not to dupe or mislead the public. In the minds of many people, public relations conjures up an image of trickery which ethical practitioners, who are in the great majority, strongly resent. There are undeniably some sharp operators in this field, as there are in any other. But most P.R. people see their role as contributing to a more open and honest relationship between their employers and the public — not the other way around.

In any case, public relations is not an art to be practised only by specialists. To be sure, professional P.R. people bring to their work a range of skills and judgment conditioned by experience.

Still, public relations is like house-painting: virtually anyone can do it, but the professionals do it better and on a larger scale.

This relates to another misconception mentioned in passing above: that public relations is a kind of luxury reserved for organizations that can afford to employ staffs of full-time specialists. The fact is that every organization — be it a one-chair barber shop, a crime syndicate or a national government — must depend for its continued existence on a degree of public support. Thus, in the passive sense, every organization has public relations. An active P.R. program is an attempt to ensure that these relations are as good as they can be.

The public relations aspects of small operations are often not readily apparent. For instance, if a neighbourhood grocery store goes bankrupt, its relations with the public may be at fault. Perhaps customers have ceased to telephone orders to the store because the line was tied up too frequently by a clerk having personal conversations. Perhaps the delivery man has been driving the van recklessly — and so driving customers away.

For public relations should be a matter of concern at every level of an organization. In many cases, a company's best P.R. representatives may hardly ever have heard the phrase. A magazine article published some years ago cited the following example: A man was waiting for his lunch in a small restaurant. A waitress came over and said: "There's been a foul-up in the kitchen. One of the cooks took ill this morning. Can I get you a newspaper to read?"

Without knowing it, the waitress reacted to the situation like a top public relations executive. She put herself in the shoes of a member of the public; in her empathy she anticipated a problem and tried to mitigate it as far as she could. She did not attempt to hide or twist the truth. Her frank explanation dispelled the misunderstanding resulting from a lack of information which gives rise to grievances unnecessarily. She knew instinctively that goodwill grows in a spirit of thoughtfulness and is blighted by neglectfulness. And she applied one of the main principles of corporate responsibility: that when you impinge on the convenience of the public, it is not their problem, but yours.

She may have been acting out of simple human courtesy. On the other hand, she may well have been the product of good public relations herself. She evidently felt responsible for the reputation of the restaurant. Perhaps her conscientiousness was instilled in her by a superior who made her feel that her work was important to the entire business — which, of course, it was.

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This leads us to yet another misconception about public relations, which is that P.R. activities are only concerned with presenting a rosy public image. Anyone who thinks that it is merely a matter of cosmetics would be well-advised to remember that stomach cramps can show on a person's face. In every organization serving the public, from a giant corporation to a small community volunteer group, the conduct of relations with the public depends primarily on the people who serve behind the counters, make the sales or canvassing calls, and so forth. If they see the organization in a favourable light, it usually will be reflected to the public.

Aware of this, large companies spend millions of dollars a year on internal public relations programs. Their expenses are high because of the impersonality inherent in their size and because they have so many employees to reach. In a small business or volunteer group, however, internal P.R. need not be elaborate or expensive. Small bodies have the advantage of convenient face-to-face communications between superiors and subordinates, and there is no more effective form of internal communications than a candid talk between a worker and the boss.

The leaders of small organizations should make it a matter of policy to discuss what is going on with their subordinates. Verbal communications may be reinforced by bulletins or newsletters designed to keep the rank-and-file informed. Incidentally, the outward appearance of these is of no great importance. It is what they say that counts.

But if workers should not be left in the dark, neither should their bosses. Professional P.R. people will tell you that problems in their field frequently go unnoticed until a crisis occurs. This can be traced to a failure to see ourselves as others see us. Robert Burns suggested that this ability could only be achieved by a gift beyond human power.

If that is so, then the most we can do is assess what other people think of us as objectively as humanly possible. Big businesses attempt to accomplish this by employing highly-experienced public relations advisors whose job is to keep a watching brief on changing attitudes and make the top management aware of the probable impact of prospective decisions. Professional P.R. people must be keenly concerned with whether the actions of their organization live up to what the public expects of it. This often entails the expenditure of large amounts of money on research to determine what the public thinks and feels.

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### *A test of public awareness may yield some surprises*

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For small-scale businesses, volunteer groups or institutions, the process of self-assessment need not be elaborate. An adequate picture may be drawn from informal discussions with its constituent publics: those who serve it, those it serves, and those it aspires to serve.

Like all effective public relations activities, such opinion research should start from within. How do the people who work for the organization perceive it? What do they expect from it, both as members of the organization and members of the public? What do they think it is doing right, and what wrong?

Having a clear view of the inside of an organization can help to improve relations on the outside by pointing to policies to ease internal tensions which might be communicated to the public. The next step is to find out how the organization is perceived by the people it serves.

External opinion research should assess what people know about an organization, as well as what they think and feel about it. A test of actual public awareness may yield some surprises. For

instance, a volunteer-run institution may find that would-be sponsors have only a vague idea of how donations to it are put to use.

The awareness of people who have no dealings with the organization directly should also be tested. Perhaps they do not know about you at all — which points the way to a basic publicity campaign. If they do know about you, it is important to establish how you are perceived; public perceptions frequently turn out to be based on faulty or incomplete information. The way you are perceived by the general public could have a serious effect on relations with your more intimate contacts. For example, a community service club may find that it is thought to be a useless social clique devoted to its own entertainment, and that is why new members are hard to recruit.

The results of opinion assessment — which, incidentally, should be carried on continually in an informal way — will indicate the ingredients of an active public relations program. It should be noted, though, that in some instances the results may reveal that little or nothing more needs to be done. An organization with the strong internal public relations that make for a contented yet disciplined work force may find that its external public relations are already excellent. There is no need to seek favourable publicity in other ways when you are getting it in the most desirable way possible — by word of mouth from people who are happy in their work.

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### *P.R. whitewash is just as thin and impermanent as the physical stuff*

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If opinion research does indicate a need for publicity initiatives, however, a few guidelines to public relations policy may be useful. Let us return at this point to our effort to sort out what public relations is by discarding what it is not. First, it should not be confused with advertising, except in the special sense of institutional advertising designed to put forth an organization's point of view or to point out its contributions to society. Good public relations may form a powerful force in selling products or raising funds, but only by creating an atmosphere of goodwill which facilitates doing an organization's main job.

There is common impression that P.R. conceals more than it reveals. This is not so if it is practised ethically. Competent P.R. people are well aware that public relations whitewash to cover up an organization's discreditable acts or failings is just as thin and impermanent as the physical stuff. Indeed they sometimes find themselves in the position of advising their principals against attempting cover-ups. They know from experience that the truth has a way of appearing at the most embarrassing times.

Knowing what public relations is *not* brings us closer to what it is. Someone once called it (in a typically negative fashion) "what you do, not what you say". Words must be backed by deeds in any attempt to generate favourable publicity. The faults uncovered in opinion research should be rectified before an active P.R. program is launched. Public relations cannot be expected to help an organization that is doing a job badly. It comes into play when you want to draw attention to the fact that you are doing a job well.

There are times, of course, when the public will perceive defects which do not exist, or which cannot be remedied as quickly and easily as it would appear on the surface. There are also times when a company's policies or actions are misunderstood. Here, public relations can play an advocacy role with the public at large similar to that played by a lawyer in a courtroom. As in the case of the waitress cited above, it pays to explain one's position to the public. While no amount of explanation will placate some close-minded critics, the majority of people may be expected to see the sense in a well-put case.

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The routine techniques of publicity are simple enough: the use of news releases and news conferences, speeches, media interviews, newsletters, etc. The more sophisticated methods are normally in the hands of professionals, and need not concern us here. It soon becomes apparent to people engaged in publicity work which vehicle is most appropriate for a particular message. The message

is the main thing: it should be stated as clearly as possible in simple layman's terms.

If that is done, the "packaging" is secondary. For example, news releases are usually rewritten by the media to fit their own needs. If a release comes from a small organization, which cannot be expected to maintain professional staff, it makes little difference if it appears to be written professionally. What matters is that it carries the necessary information in comprehensible language. And it is immaterial to reporters and editors whether a news conference is held in a church basement or the fanciest hotel suite in town.

On a small scale, the techniques of public relations are less important than the principles. The primary principle has already been implied here, but it bears repeating bluntly: Tell the truth. Do not try to manipulate or exaggerate the truth, just tell it. And tell it as fully and in as much detail as you can.

Another principle of public relations was once unwittingly broached by that most sensible of authors, W. Somerset Maugham: ". . . I, having nothing to say, said nothing." Fundamental as it may seem, the rule that a story must be worth the telling is often honoured in the breach. Small organizations especially have a tendency to flood the local media with inconsequential items. They thus place themselves in the position of the boy who cried wolf when they want publicity on matters of real importance to them.

A final principle is that public relations is everybody's business from top to bottom in an organization. Since it is truly "what you do, not what you say", the person with the heaviest responsibility for public relations is necessarily the one at the top. This does not mean that there should be no one further down who is specifically in charge of public relations: on the contrary, the P.R. soup is sometimes spoiled by having too many cooks make it. But the ultimate boss should be conscious of the public relations aspects of every major decision that is made.

We objected at the outset to a dictionary definition which ignored the moral basis of public relations activities. One should never expect public relations to make an organization appear any more virtuous than it actually is. It is a matter of first doing right, and then telling about it. A public relations policy which sticks to this order of priority can hardly fail.