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How the Public Relations Counselor Serves Management

In the difficult task of managing an enterprise today, professional public relations counseling can significantly assist senior executives.

Every successful corporation, (profit or non-profit) needs public goodwill—favorable public opinion—to survive in today's economic and social climate. The corporation that has long prided itself on its fine products may suddenly feel the impact of government intervention. Environmental groups, consumer activists or community groups may suddenly confront management with demands for social change.

Business Challenges

Employees may present management with strike threats, or even reject labor contracts their own union leaders have negotiated with management. Government agencies may issue public criticism or warning notices without prior warning.

When such situations develop, management recognizes that good products and good services are not enough.

The "bottom line" can be damaged as much by hostile public opinion as by falling sales or product failure. Indeed, there are numerous cases of otherwise successful corporations and non-profit institutions being hard-hit, financially damaged, and even put out of business by negative public reaction or the resulting government response.

Every chief executive, director or trustee knows that the future of his or her enterprise is vitally affected by relations with the public.

Managed Communications

Professional public relations counselors, therefore, do not create public relations. Rather, they seek to manage relations with the public in an orderly and effective manner. They assist in developing policy and in communicating with various groups, just as attorneys assist in legal matters and Certified Public Accountants provide skilled assistance in financial matters. Often this involves problem-solving.

Today, chief executives welcome the professional assistance of a wide variety of specialists. They do not always recognize, however, that the public relations professionals can help formulate programs, manage and implement the communications function. Because public relations cannot easily be quantified (any more than one can measure the value of skilled legal services in preventing problems from developing in the first place), it is an unfamiliar area for many chief executives.

The Counselor's Role

Yet, public relations firms such as ours have played an increasingly important part in society since the early years of the Twentieth Century.

Our work varies widely, depending on the specific situations in which we are involved.

Sometimes, the problem is relatively simple: a company or organization has served the public interest well, but its good actions are unknown to those whose support is needed. In such a case, we develop an appropriate communications

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program to tell the organization's positive accomplishments in an effective way.

Sometimes, a corporate or organizational policy has aroused public criticism. Is the criticism justified? What really motivates the attack? What should the organization do about it? What response would be appropriate?

Most often, simple communication isn't enough. Our first task might be to determine what the concerned publics really know and believe about the disputed policy. Occasionally, skilled professional judgment and experience suffice. But usually we will conduct research through opinion-polling methods, to learn what the public—or some representative portion of it—actually thinks.

Advice and Action

We might do nothing more than prepare a questionnaire for employees, if that's all that's necessary. Or we might conduct detailed interviews with individuals in the community. Our aim is to have a solid basis of fact on which to recommend public relations activities that will be well received.

On some occasions, we might find that management's message isn't "getting through" to the people it wants to reach simply because no channel of communication exists. In that instance, we may recommend creation of an employee newspaper, a series of presentations to security analysts,

creation of a speakers program or a brochure, video or other techniques appropriate to the need.

Perhaps the channels of communication already exist, but aren't being used effectively. A corporate annual report may fail, for one reason or another, to reflect the vigor and growth of a corporation or organization. Or the local newspaper won't publish news releases because they're dull or not newsworthy. The organization's story isn't being told persuasively and positively.

Each situation is different. There is no "standard" answer...no "standard" solution.

If your organization faces any of the problems we've described, professional public relations counsel should be able to assist you.

A Continuing Need

Normally, public relations counsel is needed, and provided, continuously, because public opinion is not easily or quickly influenced. Most of our services are provided on an annual basis. Sometimes, however, a special problem or a short-term situation develops in which immediate assistance is needed. We are equipped to provide it.

Sometimes, organizations seek only our counsel, having their own staff implement our recommendations. In most cases, however, we are asked to recommend what should be done, and when our recommendations are approved, to implement them with our own staff and facilities.

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We may be called upon to prepare detailed public relations programs and policy papers. We may be asked to assist with product promotion and other marketing activities. We may be assigned the task of developing a corporate brochure or news releases. We may need to arrange personal meetings for client executives with editors and writers. We may become involved in producing films or videotapes, if they will help tell the organization's story effectively.

Recognized Service Standards

Many corporations and non-profit organizations in this community have used the services of professional public relations counsel. They have found value in the outside perspective that a counseling firm brings to their problems. They have also found it useful to be able to draw on the varied skills and experience of public relations specialists, just as they now draw upon other professional consultants.

Sometimes immediate problems arise that require greater resources than those presently available internally. Frequently, it is both more economical and practical to use an outside counseling firm than to augment permanent staff in such "emergencies."

Within our firm is an Accredited member of the Public Relations Society of America. Our organization adheres to the Society's code of standards for the practice of public relations. We welcome an opportunity to meet with you and explore whether professional public relations counsel can assist you in meeting your management objectives.

Adapted from a monograph prepared by the Public Relations Society of America.

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