

Public Relations: Core Principles and Strategies that Contribute to the Bottom Line

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ABSTRACT: Building relationships and changing behavior are at the core of successful public relations programs, ensuring that an organization not only survives, but thrives. Adhering to core values and principles of public relations and utilizing strategic communications can cement success, not only through a crisis, but on an everyday basis. The question is posed as to whether we are ready to answer the toughest questions from anyone, at any time. Key public relations strategies ensure successful communications contribute to the bottom line.

INTRODUCTION

The empty pill bottle. Imagine, if you will, an empty pill bottle. A plain, ordinary, white, blank, plastic pill bottle with no writing on it whatsoever. There are no logos, no directions, no date of expiration; there is nothing to indicate any authority or even why you need the contents of the pill bottle. Perhaps you don't need the product inside and perhaps it's not even for you, specifically. There are no disclaimers, no certified markings of any kind on the bottle. There is no address; in fact, it's difficult to

understand where the bottle originated or who sent it. There is absolutely no indication of its purpose or its function.

With this in mind, would you eat the pills in that pill bottle?

If not, would you eat the pills if you were told that they were for your benefit?

Would you eat the pills if you were told that you could trust the person asking you to eat the pills?

Would you eat the pills if you were told that they have been given out for 50 years now and that there is no reason to worry?

In this pill bottle example, communication is non-existent. There is no link between the person asking you, you, and the contents of that pill bottle. Public relations is that link. Without it, our public is blind to our organizations, deaf to our messages and ultimately ignorant of our value.

What is public relations? Public relations is really about building relationships. It's building a relationship with you, the

holder of that bottle and its contents. It's the crafting of trust that allows you to look at a logo on that bottle and in seconds trust the product inside. It's the words on that bottle that have been carefully selected and arranged to convey our message. It's the communication and education that establish a relationship with you and earn your trust in the organization promoting the product.

All of these elements illustrate that public relations is a management function that contributes to the bottom line. We can understand its impact by developing strategies based on research and statistical data and then evaluating our efforts. This way, we can learn how we should apply our time and money to help us meet our objectives. Of course it's very dynamic and needs to adapt to changes in the organization and in the surrounding environment.

There are many facets to public relations. Successful public relations programs are comprehensive and include objectives, strategies and tactics to achieve an organization's goals. School programs, events and newsletters, for example, are all tactics that contribute to the program as a whole and help us to achieve our objectives. They do not, in and of themselves, constitute a public relations program. All tactics are executed because research indicates they are needed to fulfill our objectives.

Now that we've established just what public relations is, let's look at some best public relations practices and illustrate some communication strategies that we can all benefit from. In any public relations program, it's critical that we act with purpose. We need to understand what our objectives are and why we are implementing the tactics we choose. For example, school programs and fairs can be important tactics that help

us meet our objectives, but they should be employed because they are helping to meet objectives, not just because they have always been a part of the program.

BEST PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICES

Remain true to your core function.

First and foremost, the single most important step for any public relations professional and organization to be successful is to remain true to itself and to its organizations' core function - the bottom line in mosquito control, of course, is protecting public health. If we ask ourselves every time we make a decision at *any* level, "will it contribute to our core function? Will it help us to protect public health?" then our business decisions will be sound, and we will ensure that our actions are on track. Those decisions then remain defensible and easy to promote. It's good business and it's good public relations.

Often we are asked to deliver a service or participate in an activity to please our constituents, and we want to please our constituents, but not at the risk of working against our core function. Over the last couple of years, one of Contra Costa Mosquito and Vector Control District's biggest issues was that of notification for fogging or spraying of adult pesticides in residential neighborhoods. Some of our residents demanded to be notified about spray efforts because it was "their right"; and they wanted a much greater lead time than we were giving. Even the local paper was putting pressure on us to fog or spray at a later time in order for them to print our spray schedules. We declined. Instead, we communicated our commitment to protecting the public, and we made the point that by waiting to kill infected mosquitoes in order to provide a longer notification period,

we were not protecting our residents' health to the best of our ability. We told the angry callers and the newspaper reporters that once we knew that people were at risk, we acted immediately in order to protect them. Had we waited to give notification, the infected mosquitoes would have flown away and increased the risk of infection. This message was not only well received, but resulted in the angry callers becoming advocates for our fogging efforts and helping us to educate their neighbors. The approach worked well because our decision to fog on our terms was true to our core function, and our honesty garnered trust and approval from our residents.

Following this guideline will also ensure that decisions we make today, if we decide to change them, can be defended tomorrow. For example, if we decide to not spray this year and then decide to spray next year – we can communicate our reasoning because it's based on scientific data or expertise. The logic is easy to follow. However, if our actions are based solely on appeasing a group of individuals, it makes it very difficult to answer to the media and to our public.

It's hard to imagine that our districts, which in some cases have been in existence for more than 80 years, may close one day; however, none of our organizations are immune to closure. Some pretty remarkable companies have succumbed in the financial crisis of 2008. Public relations is therefore needed to tout the benefits and value of our programs that protect public health. And it should be a daily and consistent effort. A good public relations program is never crisis driven.

Be prepared to answer tough questions NOW. One of the most important activities and a core element of public relations is to be prepared to answer tough questions. Could we, right now, answer tough questions? Here are some examples of real and worst-case-scenario questions.

“My daughter died of West Nile virus. How could you let this happen!”

“Why are some mosquito agencies spraying and some are not? Is it because it DOES cause problems?”

“Organophosphates??? No Way!!

We may know the answers, but can we answer them in just four seconds? Then can we combine that answer with a theme – our messages – and create a 20-second sound bite? That's to ensure we don't get misquoted or taken out of context. The way to accomplish this is to invest in media and communication training.

Invest in media & communication training. Investing in media training ensures that all employees and trustees communicate the same messages and can do so in concise statements. Media training prepares employees to speak to any person, group or reporter in difficult circumstances. If you can speak with media personnel, you are most likely prepared to speak with virtually anyone.

Media training is crucial for everyone in your organization – even if they don't talk with media personnel. Provide training for your front office staff, technicians, management, trustees – virtually everyone. Each person communicates to *someone* at

sometime, eventually.

And just because we may be experts in our field, doesn't mean that we are experts in communicating *about* our field. Heart surgeons, pro golfers, scientists – they can truly be experts in their field, but that doesn't mean they can automatically communicate their expertise in short, memorable sound bites and in a language that people can understand.

Media training also allows us to conquer our fears of speaking. It forces us to address key issues and get prepared for the tough questions that come our way. Best of all, everything we learn and use in learning to interview with the media can be used to communicate to any of our constituents – residents, city council members, county officials, legislators – anyone.

Once media trained, we can't afford to pass up interviews. It's not about simply answering questions; it's about taking the opportunity to get our messages to our constituents.

Never talk about what you don't do.

When we do communicate with the media or our constituents, we should never talk about what we don't do. It's a waste of opportunity and money. For example, if someone were to ask us "why are you poisoning the environment?", our first reaction might be to say "we don't poison the environment!" But if we say that, research shows that the only words people will remember from that statement are "we poison." Instead, use that question as an opportunity to utilize your mere 20 seconds to deliver positive messages.

If people ask us "why are you poisoning our environment?" we could answer: "We apply pesticides that are

registered with the EPA and approved for protecting public health." In that one sentence, we're saying **four** positive statements and it's short enough that it won't be edited. Then we're assured we won't be misquoted.

Taking the time to develop answers based on anticipated or worst case questions is always a best practice.

Take advantage of media interviews. A good story saves thousands of dollars on paid advertising. Why pass up those opportunities to get your message disseminated? You'll garner more credibility from a reported story than you will from an advertisement. And you'll build a better relationship with reporters as well.

GREAT PUBLIC RELATIONS PROGRAMS AREN'T ALWAYS EXPENSIVE

Act with purpose. A good public relations program doesn't have to cost a lot of money. In fact, some of the best award-winning strategies are those that make the biggest difference for the least amount of money. The key is to act with purpose defining your program. You do this through a SWOT analysis. A SWOT analysis is a tool that business planners use to gauge an organization and its environment. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. The idea is to take advantage of your strengths and opportunities and to resolve your weaknesses and threats by creating objectives and working to accomplish those objectives.

Utilize your resources. Your best resource is right at your fingertips: your

employees. They can give presentations at garden clubs, Kiwanis clubs, homeowner's associations and more. They can write articles for community magazines and newspapers and utilize cable television, often overlooked, free and powerful tactics to get your message across if it helps to meet your objective.

MVCAC public relations committee and Web site. Another great resource is the Mosquito and Vector Control Association of California's Public Relations Committee. We have a variety of expertise to help you in all things related to public relations, and we would be thrilled to assist you. That's why we developed a Web site just for MVCAC members: www.mvcacPR.com. We've tried to put all of our materials on this site for members to tailor and use.

Say yes to media interviews. Media coverage is FREE. We simply can't afford to ignore this valuable resource. Accept every media opportunity possible because it's really an opportunity to get YOUR message across. It's not about simply answering the reporter's question. It's free. It's priceless. Also, it's our responsibility to connect with the very public with whom our success or failure depends.

Ultimate goal: Evaluation. Do what you can with the resources you have at the very least, but work toward conducting research and evaluation to ensure your money and time are well spent and successful. There are easy ways to conduct research that are no-to-low cost, such as asking callers: "How did you hear about us?" Adding the same question to your mosquitofish log is a great place to learn the answer to your efforts in this area. There are many ways to

survey your constituents. You could pose a survey at the end of presentations and survey randomly chosen people who called in for service. Conducting surveys via the internet utilizing free survey software such as Survey Monkey is also a valuable resource. These evaluation methods can help your organization understand how valuable and successful your marketing efforts are so that you can ensure your time and money are well spent. Don't assume you know the answer to these questions. It's more effective to know the answer and change your tactics accordingly.

SUMMARY

- Incorporate public relations as a management function.
- Remain true to your core function.
- Get media (communication) training.
- Be prepared for toughest question.
- Don't talk about what you don't do.
- Act with purpose.