

Public Relations: What It Is and How It Works

by Starr McCaffery, Sound Solutions, Inc.

My late mother told people I was “in advertising.” My kids tell their teachers, “My mom writes for the newspaper.”

Why the disparity? I’m a public relations consultant who learned long ago that few outside of the industry know what that really means.

According to “The Father of Public Relations” Edward Bernays, “Public Relations is a management function which tabulates public attitudes, defines the policies, procedures and interest of an organization followed by executing a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.”

No wonder there’s confusion. And the irony of such confusion—about an industry in which clear communication should be a core competency—is not lost on those of us in the profession. But that’s our problem, not yours. So let’s take a more practical look at what public relations is, how it’s different from advertising and what it can do for you.

Public relations has several sub-disciplines. We’ll consider two, touching on community relations and focusing on media relations.

Community relations involves building relationships with others who live and work around you. Most simply, it’s about establishing a sense of good will among those inside and outside of your organization.

Think about why you joined the Chamber of Commerce. Among the benefits of being a Chamber member is the message it sends that you are willing to invest in the

community. By joining the Chamber, you’ve already launched your PR effort. But what’s next?

For many it’s media relations—establishing relationships with editors and reporters with the goal of having your story told in their publications and on their broadcasts and Web sites. It’s one of two ways to get your story told in the media, the other being advertising which, despite what my mother said, isn’t PR.

In advertising, you purchase media space or time to publish or broadcast your message. Your ad is guaranteed to appear because you pay for it.

With media relations, you don’t pay for the space or air time, offering significant cost savings. However, there is no guarantee your story will be told or, if it is, that it will be told the way you want.

There’s a risk when investing in media relations, but there are guidelines and procedures a PR professional will employ to reduce that risk. If successful in telling your story, the return on your investment can be quite rewarding.

The first step in a successful media relations effort is identifying what you have to say and crafting a news angle. This is why public relations counselors must be proficient in journalism skills. An effective news release written in AP (Associated Press) style, the universal format of news writing, is then distributed to editors. Your PR consultant will discuss the news value of your release with the editor and work to have a reporter assigned to your story, or to con-

vince the editor to publish your release as a news article.

So which is better, advertising or PR?

Advertising offers the guarantee of placement, but may be considered self-serving and has no guarantee of action by your target audience. PR offers no guarantee of placement, but when secured, editorial coverage has credibility in audience’s minds and that builds your brand. A combination of both typically will bring the best return on your investment.

Some other PR functions that may play a role in your business communications efforts include research, messaging, spokesperson training, events and promotions, lobbying and advocacy, reputation and issues management, and crisis preparation and response. Many PR consultants also provide editorial services, such as brochure or Web site composition.

To learn more about public relations, www.wikipedia.org offers a fairly complete overview. Al Ries’ bestseller, *The Fall of Advertising & The Rise of PR*, is another good resource. PR case studies involving a number of sub-disciplines can be found at www.chicagoprfirm.com.

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