

Lead, Follow and Get Out of the Way: Three Roles of Public Relations

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A distinguished member of the PR business once opined in a lecture that the role of PR “comes from reading the public mind, not manipulating it.”

Not quite. PR has three roles – It leads, follows and gets out of the way, depending on circumstances. The lecturer focused on the “follow” theme and ignored the other two roles to make a point. But one should not forget that PR in certain circumstances still attempts – successfully – to set agenda. After all, much of what the White House does is agenda-setting PR for how to address challenges at home and abroad.

There is a way to think about how PR operates that every PR practitioner should know. It is a heuristic useful for strategizing messages, media and campaigns.

PR Strategy	Media Power	Audience alignment with message	Strength of message (Clarity/persuasive power)
Lead	High	Neutral to low	High
Follow	Low	Neutral to high	Low to high
Get out of way	NA	High	High

Lead

One can use public relations to lead opinion when there is power over media that transmit messages to target audiences.

Media power is of two kinds: Direct and granted. A leader of an organization has direct power over what is said on the organization’s web site, intranet, publications and other media. A President of the United States has no direct power over what the media covers, messages carried and how the President is evaluated. The President of the United States is granted media power. That is, by reason of the position, the media cover a President’s remarks more often than not. Hence, a President has a greater chance of getting his messages out than, say, the Speaker of the House.

A President’s power comes from a relative certainty that if there is a message to send, media will report it in some way, whether or not coverage is positive or negative. But, power is permitted and not taken. Media guard jealously their right to take coverage away when they do not feel a President has something compelling or relevant to say. Every President in the TV age has fumed because what the President considered to be a major speech, TV networks would not

cover in prime time. On the other hand, rejection of coverage is an exception and not the rule.

Permission-based power is situational. During a crisis, a perceived authority can command airwaves and media in ways that otherwise the authority could never do. Think, for example, of the National Hurricane Center during the height of storm season. As the Center follows an eye to landfall, it commands intense interest and coverage on national and local media that it does not get at any other time of year. On the other hand, many organizations cannot gain media attention no matter how hard they try. I once served a billion dollar defense company that could not get major business media to report its news because reporters felt the company was too small.

Media power encompasses message distribution but not message precision. A person with strong media power can have a message rejected. Look back at the Hearst Newspaper chain of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. William Randolph Hearst controlled the editorial voice of his newspapers and projected his message daily to millions of citizens. However, his political ambitions were thwarted. His message did not sell.

The Hearst example, by the way, is instructive for those who fear media concentration in the U.S. today. It tells us what the public should fear is not media power to speak but absence of message – that is, lack of coverage. Media fail to report relevant news more because of personal or institutional bias than abuse of control. A classic case happened to the Wright Brothers as they perfected the aeroplane outside of Dayton, Ohio. Dayton reporters were so sure the pair had not invented a plane that they never traveled to the edge of town to see the contraption flying over a cow pasture just off the turnpike, nor did they report on the secretive Brothers' activities. They missed the biggest technology story of the young century.

Message effectiveness is based on the central control element in Public Relations – target audiences. If a target audience is unalterably opposed to a message, distribution power and message strength are useless. To use an example, if a nation's citizens oppose monarchy and are enthusiastic for democracy, trying to make regency palatable is fruitless. There is nothing to be done except to change the message. One can preserve symbols of monarchy only within democracy, as Britain has done for nearly 300 years. However, if an audience is slightly negative to neutral or positively inclined toward a message, one can conduct PR quite differently. One can use a medium as a "bully pulpit," to quote Teddy Roosevelt, to change public opinion in support of one's programs. This has been true in American government since the Continental Congress and conduct of the Revolutionary War. Pamphleteers used rebellion against King George III and available Colonial presses as a means to lead 13 colonies toward freedom and eventually, a Constitution.

In the present day, similar shaping of public opinion occurred with the debate over whether to go to war with Iraq. The American public was not solidly opposed to war with Iraq, although some allies were. Argument ranged over the earth with presentations not only to Americans but also to the United Nations, to Congress and to various countries' leaders and citizens. The fact that we did go to war with the narrow approval of Congress showed that the campaign worked, even if it didn't stifle dissent.

Much Washington, D.C. lobbying attempts to set agenda for the Congress and White House through persuasive argument and campaign donations.

Follow

The majority of PR practitioners (myself included) do not set agenda for anything. We ride news and events and insert clients into them, so their point of view and/or product or service is exposed. That is why serious PR practitioners are news junkies, avidly following industries and clients and competitors' fortunes.

The follower role of PR comes when one has little media power, a mixed alignment of target audiences toward a message and a message itself that might not be compelling. This is the fate of many, if not most, PR programs. Few products, services or messages have such strong news value that they sell themselves. Rather, PR practitioners market them by persuading media of a story's relevance. There is no more compelling case of this than anti-tobacco campaigns. Anyone old enough to remember the early anti-tobacco efforts of the late 1950s and early 1960s knows that communications had almost no effect on the public at that time. It wasn't until later with a Surgeon General's report and steadfast slogging that the anti-tobacco message triumphed. Today, smoking is banned almost everywhere indoors. Anti-tobacco campaigns at the beginning and for a long time thereafter attempted to manipulate the public's mind and failed utterly. The public wasn't listening.

In a career of more than 25 years, I have had one client whose message sold itself -- Porsche, the sports car company. Entertainment PR specialists will, of course, point to stars and starlets as automatic news generators when they are hot. And there are industries that seem to obtain editorial coverage more easily than others, such as health and food. But just try to mount a national PR campaign for whole life insurance, or for auto muffler maintenance, or power drills. Some products and concepts are too banal or complex to grasp. A discussion of how to manage plant capacity and inventory together in manufacturing systems is a topic in which only a few manufacturing professionals will have interest. That doesn't mean the topic is unimportant: It is beyond the comprehension of media and media consumers.

Lacking media power, practitioners focus on message. That is, how does one make a message meaningful to media and target audiences? The PR

practitioner's challenge is to explain boring, difficult topics clearly and compellingly such that reporters and target audiences understand how the topics affect them. I have often called this "pocketbook journalism." PR provides translation between industries and consumers that experts often are unable to do for themselves. If one is successful in repackaging a concept, it is possible to gain media attention, and perhaps, power, for an idea. Media might look for stories about the concept and provide a platform on which one can speak. This is frequently the case for health issues, such as heart failure, cancer or diabetes.

Get Out of the Way

In rare instances, issues arise with a life of their own. Sometimes, these are fads, such as a toy a child must have for Christmas, or a new dance, or a tattoo. Messages about fads often are transmitted outside of mainstream media. Individuals imitate each other. People talk. Underground publications and the Internet spread the word. The same holds true for issues that concern a populace and which spread, again, of their own accord through rumor or meetings or other below-the-media methods.

One such instance occurred during the first energy crisis in the U.S. in the early 1970s. It dealt with ceiling fans. Ceiling fans had long been out of favor: People bought air conditioners instead. One of the first and oldest makers of ceiling fans – The Hunter Fan Company – was down to one worker assembling ceiling fans in a Memphis factory. All other fans the factory produced were commodity box and pedestal fans. However, when it was shown that a ceiling fan was an efficient way to cut energy costs, orders poured into Hunter. The company went from one worker to more than 100 turning out thousands of ceiling fans a day. The company could not have generated this sudden acceptance on its own. In fact, it had been contemplating getting out of the business.

Today, one of the easiest places to see below-radar idea transmission is on the Internet where groups organize themselves across large geographical regions outside of the attention of mainstream media. Media power in this instance comes from the openness of the Internet itself, which allows low-cost publishing of content.

When an idea or fad mushrooms, PR's best response is to get out of the way and to let it grow, unless the idea is harmful to a client. In that case, one must proactively battle it. However, if the idea benefits the client, there is little one can – or should -- do to guide its explosion beyond careful facilitation of what is already happening. One helps the client respond adequately to questions and information, and this might be hectic enough in itself. If all of PR could be response to self-generating ideas or fads, anyone could do the job. Unfortunately, it rarely happens, and it is equal to winning the lottery. No company should hinge its future on spontaneous, viral transmission of messages about its products, services or concepts.

Not One Way

There isn't one way to practice public relations, and practitioners should never expect or demand formulas. Although the crafts of communication have been studied and synthesized for more than 3000 years, there is no assurance that any one of thousands of techniques will work in any given instance. The key to public relations strategy and programming is to recognize from where one is starting, to know the facts and then, to apply techniques creatively to enhance communications. Experienced practitioners do this intuitively, but it is beneficial to think through how media power audience perception of the message and the message itself. It can save time and energy.

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