

Public Relations Planning: A Structured Approach and Process are Paramount

By Joseph Curley, APR, CPRC

All too often public relations is characterized as smoke and mirrors or shooting from the hip without any clear plan or objective. And unfortunately, even in today's more sophisticated public relations arena, this stereotype image is occasionally being reinforced by an isolated practitioner. But in reality, any public relations action less than well thought out and strategically implemented would not be effective in today's environment of well organized, funded and educated special interest audiences.

A Changing PR Environment

Distracters and advocates confronting today's corporate, environmental, charitable and social issues have moved a long way from the "little old lady in tennis shoes" waving a home-made sign. With the wealth of timely Internet information at the "click-of-a-mouse," individual consumers can become extremely knowledgeable on nearly every product or service available. All this readily available, sophisticated information for groups with a cause and agenda has quickly put new emphasis on the way public relations programs need to be developed and structured.

While the practice of public relations is formalized in textbooks through models such as the RACE process (Research, Audience & Action, Communicate, and Evaluation), there are no mandatory local, state or federal laws or guidelines for its day-to-day practice. The lack of a state or federal governing body to require specific compliance in public relations programs may actually be a contributing factor to some programs, though missing certain "textbook" steps or phases, being implemented. To be realistic, there may be instances where a customized and abbreviated PR program is appropriate and effective, but in the majority of instances, a multi-step planned approach is necessary.

As an unlicensed profession, it's up to each individual practitioner to establish and maintain high work standards and guidelines for programs. Public Relations associations such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the Florida Public Relations Association (FPRA) certainly strive for "best practices" with its membership, but with little power to govern or discipline members, the final decision rests solely with each individual Public Relations professional.

Align the Public Relations Process with the Legal Profession

The public relations profession can easily be compared to the law profession as both groups have very similar approaches to business practices, with one of the main exceptions being an established government system that regulates the law profession – the judicial system. Public relations agency functions are nearly identical to those of law firms in retainer and hourly billing, specialty fields of practice, team approach structures with various levels of staff experience, awareness of possible client conflict of interests, and strategic thought and planning processes to help clients.

The comparison of the two professions becomes more clear when side-by-side cases are examined. The first steps in effective public relations planning are similar to an attorney's initial fact-finding approach, and the implementation process closely parallels an attorney's actions required to carry a case through trial.

Consider the following scenarios:

- A public relations counselor receives a call from an automobile manufacturer currently getting bad press resulting from a quality control problem – complicated by an alleged management cover up attempt to avoid a costly vehicle recall.
- An attorney receives a call from a man who is at the police station, charged with drunk driving and leaving the scene of the accident.

Beginning with initial contact from the client, neither a public relations counselor nor an attorney can give on-the-spot answers to the two most common initial client questions – *What action is necessary? And how much will it cost?*

Both questions require research into the details surrounding how the client's problem was created, past behavior patterns by the client, opposition from special interest groups, case studies from similar situations and the client's anticipated future behavior.

The only logical immediate counsel in both scenarios is to caution and educate the client on what statement they should or should not make to specific audiences until more decision-making information is gathered. Traditionally, public relations may be more inclined to encourage some initial strategic message communication, whereas the legal profession is more likely to discourage any communication in the early stage.

In-depth research would be the next step for both the public relations practitioner and the lawyer. While the attorney visits the law library to study similar case law, the public relations practitioner reviews case studies regarding similar issues. This benchmark data is used along with additional resource material to help determine the objective and desired outcome.

The next step is to identify target audiences that are key to achieving the objective and outcome. For the attorney, the audiences may very well be the prosecutor or judge. And as the case advances, it may include the jury and jury foreman, who may be an opinion leader within that audience. In like fashion, the public relations practitioner may target owners of the effected vehicles, dealers and shareholders and other high-interest stakeholders including selected media.

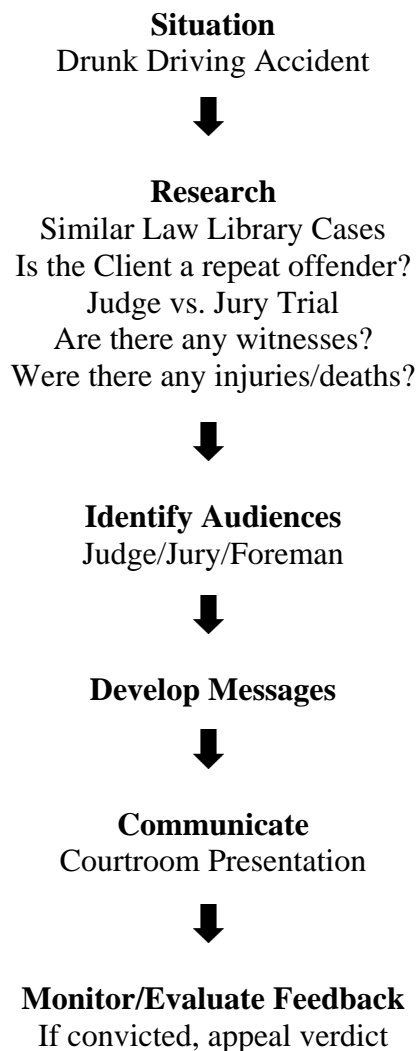
Audience-specific messages are developed, and while the public relations practitioner may utilize the news media and direct contact to deliver the message, an attorney develops a brief and defense case for trial.

During the "messaging phase" both the attorney and public relations practitioner use facts, history, evidence and client behavior and reputation to reinforce the individual statements and messages.

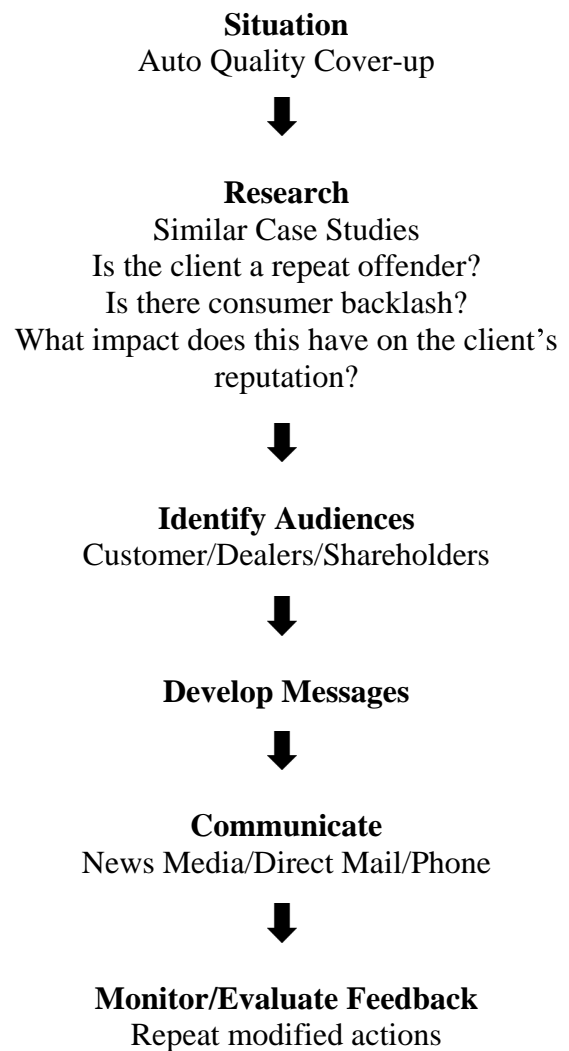
Listening to feedback from the on-going process is a critical step. The public relations practitioner may conduct opinion surveys, monitor news coverage, gauge reaction from vehicle owners and watch shareholder activity, while the attorney listens to the prosecution lawyer, the judge and even the body language of the jury. All this audience feedback is constantly evaluated and used to modify the current plan, putting new emphasis and meaning on some messages and audiences and less on others – in effect repeating our process. In the attorney’s situation, an example of ultimate feedback and evaluation process would be to receive an undesired verdict, appeal and retry the case.

Effective Public Relations is a Structured Process

Attorney



Public Relations



Personal Discipline is the Key

This comparison shows that each of the attorney's steps in the required process of law relates closely to proper public relations planning and implementation. Just as the lawyer must follow the structured and regulated steps in the judicial system, we must follow a carefully defined and organized plan. For an attorney, skipping one of the steps of diligent representation can result in severe penalties, yet the public relations practitioner has unbridled power to choose paths that include short-cuts in program structure. A client will not be served justly if any of the basic chronological steps of research, audience and message identification, communications planning and monitoring feedback and evaluation are ignored.

For both the attorney and the public relations professional the stakes are high for the outcome ... it may be a person's life or the life of a corporation. The public relations practitioner needs to take the profession and the responsibility it carries with it very seriously – because choosing the right process rests solely with us individually.

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Joe has practiced public relations in Florida for more than 35 years and is now semi-retired. He was the co-founder and president of one of Florida's largest PR firms, Curley & Pynn Public Relations Management in Orlando, which he sold in 2004. Currently a public relations and marketing consultant at his own firm Stingray Solutions, Inc., Joe is retained by Universal Studios Parks & Resorts as Senior Corporate Communications Counsel, international marketing & PR. He is directly involved in theme park projects in Singapore, Dubai and South Korea. He is a past national president of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Foundation and a past state president of Florida Public Relations Association (FPRA). In 1993, and again in 2005 he was honored with FPRA's highest statewide award for outstanding professional leadership. Joe is a requested speaker throughout the country for speeches on public relations issues. He is a graduate of the Executive Management Program at Rollins College Graduate School of Business. In 2009, Joe was one of two alumni that were inducted into the Evergreen Park Community High School Hall of Fame (Chicago).

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