Highway Departments Need Good Public Relations

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First of all I want to assure you that I am neither an expert nor an experienced public relations man. My limited experience in this work goes back only about a year; although I have been called upon for many years to do many little jobs for my department in what might be called public relations.

This matter of changing one's occupation to meeting changing needs suggests to me the man a traveler met on a train in the great cattle country of the southwest. This man maintained that there was no need for anyone to ever be without work if he were willing to adapt himself to the circumstances. When asked his occupation he said he was a piano tuner. The traveler then said to him, "Surely there are hardly any pianos in these cow camps. How can you make a living in that business out here?" The piano tuner then replied, "No, there are very few pianos in this country but you ought to see the work I get tightening up all these wire fences."

The highway industry of this nation is big business. The current annual expenditures on expansion and maintenance of facilities are running over 4 billions and a reasonable estimate of the present capital value of the 3 1/3 million miles of American highways is no less than 50 billion dollars. Its efforts reach into every community, and affect the life of every citizen. It is possibly the one greatest peaceful industry whose administration is primarily in the hands of the elected or appointed representatives of the people. There are many reasons why those entrusted with the administration of the highway industry need good public relations. It is my purpose to outline a few of these for brief discussion.

Many years ago the Divine Teacher was traveling along a highway with his disciples when they began to dispute as to who would be the greatest among them. He rebuked them and settled the dispute by saying, "He that would be greatest among you, let him become the servant of all." The full impact of this great new teaching upon their
minds is not recorded for us but we know that since that time devoted men and women have been willing to become literally the servants of mankind that they might achieve eternal greatness. But there is another side to this great truth. In that brief statement we recognize the foundations of the democratic society which was not to be erected until 17 centuries had elapsed.

From another source, the ancient Greeks, a very practical and reasonable people, there passed into the stream of history the idea of the participation of the average citizen in the affairs of state. It remained for a Virginia squire, Tom Jefferson, to weld these ideas into an immortal instrument for the establishment of human rights. We have labeled a part of that great charter the "Bill of Rights" but it carried with it more than a guarantee for the preservation of rights. It entails a responsibility for the fullest exercise of those rights in which both the citizen and his servants must share. Our political literature is filled with such expressions as "public servant" and "public trusts", all reflecting a recognition of the basic philosophy on which government must rest if it is to survive as a force for the protection of free people.

So in this land of ours we find the peculiar situation in which the governed are the masters and the governors are the servants and we must continually strive to find ways to make this relationship more effective. In particular must those of us in governmental positions find ways to remind ourselves of this situation and of our duties as servants of the governed. A recognition of this and an effort to do something about it can be said to constitute what we call public relations.

PUBLIC RELATIONS—AN OBLIGATION

Not only does the highway administrator have an inherent duty to the public which he must fulfill but he must ever keep in mind that the support of his organization comes only from the public it serves. Arthur Page, of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, makes this statement:

"All business in a democratic country begins with public permission and exists only by public approval."

If that be true of private enterprise; how much more is it true of public affairs! The earning of public approval, and the maintenance of it, once it has been earned, are the very essence of good public relations. Public support is something which no highway department can afford to be without at the present critical time in highway development. The overcrowding of our highways, the traffic toll in lives and
destruction of property, and the prophecies of more dire things to come have begun to create in the public mind the thought that perhaps all is not well in the field of highway administration. This growing suspicion is reflected in an upsurge of interest in toll authorities and in a variety of panaceas that may parallel and sometimes duplicate the existing machinery for highway administration. It has now become necessary to convince the public that there is nothing wrong with highway administration that proper public support will not cure.

We in Kentucky have a gasoline tax that is among the highest in the nation—seven cents. Yet when we analyze the cost to the average taxpayer he is usually astounded to find that he is paying less than fifty dollars per year for use of the state's highways. He is further surprised to learn that he is paying more for insurance on his vehicle than for the road it uses. And when we ask him how much he spends for such frivolities as drinks or cigarettes he is truly startled. The problem of adequate engineering manpower and the problem of funds adequate to the task could quickly be solved if the public which pays the bills and elects our legislative bodies knew as much about these problems as you gentlemen know. Informing the people is a task that must be done if we expect to continue in business.

Not only do we need to inform our public as to the problems we are facing in the administration of the highway industry, but there is need to also provide some form of criteria by which the public can judge the many proposals which are constantly being put forth as solutions to various problems. The average citizen wants to know if the new expressway will really solve his commuting problem. He wants to know if the proposed toll-road is feasible; and if limited access to the belt line will make it safer for the school bus to operate. Certainly we cannot expect to make him an expert on engineering and traffic but he needs something to hold to—something to support a reasonable conclusion when such matters come up.

To conduct an effective public relations program an organization must have something worthwhile to present. Industry has been working on the problem of public relations as it applies to the customer, for many years and some clear cut principles have emerged. There are a number of definitions for the term, public relations, but I think Verne Burnett, vice president of General Foods has the best of all. He says it is simply to "live right and be understood". If we accept this, then we see first that any organization or individual who hopes for good public relations must deserve them.

Living right is something most public relations councilors stress above all and many top level men in this field insist on sitting in on
the policy making of their clients. They argue that the proverbial ounce of prevention is easier to apply than the pound of cure. Now in this road building business not all of us are privileged to help in the making of high policy but we do have the duty of driving home this principle of “living right” at every opportunity. If all policy makers appreciated the value of this idea, I feel that it would be strongly reflected in the policies they are called upon to make. But “living right” involves not the policy makers alone. It is something that must permeate every organization from the top to the bottom. The acts of the humblest flagman on the road may at times have as great an impact on part of the public as the highest policies of the commissioner. C. S. Mullins, the distinguished chief engineer of the Virginia Highway Department, loves to tell of an occasion when driving in his personal car he came upon a maintenance crew digging out a base failure. Since none of the men recognized him he decided to ask a question and see what their attitude would be. So he asked the purpose of the large hole they were making in the road. One of the men yelled back gruffly, “To bury a horse.”

MEANS OF PROMOTING PUBLIC RELATIONS

Now since “living right” involves so many people in a great organization, such as a state highway department, one is justified in wondering how a special office devoted entirely to public relations can do much to affect the overall action of the department. Certainly a public relations officer cannot sit at the elbow of each employee whose duties involve contact with the public, but once we realize that public relations is largely a matter of attitude, we begin to see how an active program of indoctrination can build up the proper attitudes. Getting this attitude into the minds and thinking of five or six thousand employees is not an easy task. Getting it into the thinking of a few dozen top men at times seems like an insurmountable problem.

Recently the commissioner of my own highway department discovered that some of the correspondence going out to the public was, to say the least, not representative of the idea that a public employee is a public servant. A great deal of time and thought was given to a means of correcting this situation. Finally arrangements were made with the University of Kentucky to provide a series of lectures on letter writing for all of the administrative personnel. The first reaction from the University was quite understandable, (knowing the average engineering student as they do). They thought our problem was purely one of correct form and grammar. Once the problem was made clear, they come up with exactly what was needed—a series of
five lectures largely based on proper attitudes. Then it was discovered that those employees most in need of this type of indoctrination were the most likely to avoid the lectures. To correct this an order was issued making attendance compulsory. Now we have bound the lectures into a neat little booklet and made them required reading for all administrative employees.

One of the most potent forces for good public relations in any group is a strong group spirit—the thing that is currently called morale. Bad morale will be reflected in grumbling and under-cover criticism which may be taken at more than face value by persons outside an organization. How many times have we heard such remarks as, “He ought to know. He works for them!” Clearing up bad morale is a job for high level policy makers and usually requires an application of the philosophy of “living right.”

If “living right” is the first and most important part of the public relations problem it is also the most difficult to achieve. Especially is this true in a governmental agency where certain political requirements keep intruding themselves into what might otherwise be sound and logical programs of action. But “living right” does not guarantee that one will always be understood. In fact, a great deal of misunderstanding is liable to follow any kind of action, good or bad. Here then is the area in which the administrator wishes to make his public relations most effective. If he has nothing to cover up and if his policies are based on sound fiscal and engineering principles then he can pull out all the stops and tell his story with perfect confidence that enough people will understand it to create favorable public reaction. Certainly it is sometimes hard to get an idea, however sound, over to the public but if we keep telling it over and over, and tell it in a simple and understandable manner, we can hope for rather general acceptance.

Selling one idea at a time is the advertiser's way of reaching and keeping his public. We are all familiar with the slogans, the singing jingles of the radio and television. If we listen we soon discover that they harp on one idea, and this may go on for years and years. Everyone who listens to Lowell Thomas knows by now that “Your hands aren't made of china”. These things become unutterably boring after a time but they also become ingrained into our thinking so that we finally begin to accept them unconsciously as truths. This one-shot method works very well in selling but it will not always cover the problem that a road administrator faces in telling his constituents all sides of his program and its accomplishments. If he can set a theme and keep playing on it, so much the better, but he must also keep a steady flow of everyday information going out if he expects to keep
an audience. Weather and road condition information is an example of this. Once the public learns that it is going to be provided with the latest and most reliable road condition information, a force for goodwill can be built up that will carry over many a rough place in public relations.

Aside from the self interest all of us have in building good will there is another side of this matter. If we accept the premise that we are in truth servants of the public then we must also accept the fact that we have a responsibility for giving the public the facts concerning our work. This may seem like an easy order to fill but it does not always turn out this way. There are a number of factors that must be considered in feeding information to the public. It is something like feeding a group of animals. We will have to consider the what, the when, the why and the how, along with the who and the where. Nearly all public relations councilors agree that journalistic training is probably the best preparation for meeting the requirements of this job but they further cite numerous successful men in this field whose basic training was in such varied activities as law, business and engineering. The most important thing, it seems, is the proper attitude toward the philosophy of living right and being understood. In any case some one person in an organization with the responsibility for handling press relations can get better results than can be had by depending on handouts from various departments when the spirit moves them.

The advantages that can come from a program of press releases were dramatically illustrated in Kentucky only recently. The citizens and businesses along an important state route had organized for the purpose of obtaining a Federal routing over it. Their claim appeared to have merit and they were advised that the matter would be referred to the proper committee at the annual meeting of the American Association of State Highway Officials in December of last year. No sooner had the meeting adjourned than the local newspapers along the route in question began to ask who was giving them the runaround; since no announcement had been forthcoming from the meeting. The delegations that had appeared at Frankfort had been told of the procedure involved and the fact that it was not a mere matter of asking and receiving but this seems never to have filtered down to the papers. When the uproar became loud enough to reach the capital, something had to be done. A release was sent out giving in detail all of the necessary procedure involved in getting the Federal designation, along with the obstacles that must be overcome and stressing the fact that the Kentucky Highway Department had no power to do more than present its case as best it could and await developments. With this informa-
tion in hand the local papers quickly informed their readers of the situation and the trouble subsided. The final results in this case were good but we had made a bad blunder in not realizing at first that scarcely anyone, editor or citizen alike, could be expected to understand the problem. A full explanation should have gone out to all interested papers as soon as it was decided to back the proposal.

At the last meeting of the American Association of State Highway Officials which I have just mentioned, Virg Hill, of Kansas, described a terrible snow storm that engulfed the state suddenly last fall. The highway employees worked around the clock to clear the roads, endured zero weather and loss of sleep for several days. Of course, as happens in such cases, all of the roads could not be cleared the first day so a very few disgruntled editors began an anvil chorus of criticism. Hill and his associates were ready for this. They promptly sent out a series of spot releases with photo mats showing the governor of the state giving certificates of commendation to those employees who had battled the storm and congratulating them upon their success. As the stories rolled off the presses the whole public attitude changed from one of criticism to one of acclaim. In recounting this Hill made the very significant statement that PUBLIC OPINION IS WHAT PEOPLE BELIEVE EVERYONE IS THINKING. My point is that this proves that public officials have at their command a power of tremendous potential if they can learn to utilize it properly. In my brief tenure in this job of trying to put our best foot forward I have been greatly impressed by the fact that even the most routine facts regarding the highways of my state are meat and drink for the news agencies. They will go to great lengths to get a story of this kind and they won't forget the man or the agency that helps them with the job.

There are other important avenues by which the alert public relations man can get his message to the public. One of these is the radio. Usually releases for radio are handled about the same as for other news media. The newscaster will use information that is terse and to the point. He won't dawdle over it so it must be clearly in focus if it is to tell the story. The smaller radio stations are also excellent outlets for well prepared and well narrated interviews on subjects that are of current interest. Preparing scripts for these and getting them onto a tape or transcription disc is a job that should preferably be handled by professionals but some one must prepare the basic material who knows its meaning and the message it must carry. A good press representative can do this better than someone assigned to it as a casual job.

The ideal means for the communication of ideas will combine
both the senses of sight and hearing. The outstanding examples of this is found in the motion picture. This is so well known that practically every large concern today is making films and trying to get them before the public. One can get films either for hire or on loan that cover about every product or service industry has to sell. A great many of the state highway departments of the nation now have films which are intended to present the various problems and activities they deal with. We in Kentucky have only recently entered this field. We have a film to show you today which we think tells something of how we operate. It shows the source of our revenues and how they are spent. It also shows the growth of the department and the vast increase in the services which we are rendering the people of our state. I do not think it is a perfect example of a good picture. Since I had nothing to do with the original preparation of the story I can speak freely, especially since I am so far from home. Seriously, the chief fault I find is that it is dated somewhat because of its reference to a particular period of time. But aside from this I feel it will be of interest to anyone who would like to be better understood, for that, after all, is the important latter half of our basic definition of public relations—live right and be understood.