Public Relations

Howard Gillespie
Bureau of Information
Purdue University

Because this subject is so broad and diversified, I am somewhat perturbed as to what I can tell you that might prove useful. Public relations is an area in which the ground rules are not too well defined, and those rules which can be pin-pointed are so general in nature that one man's opinion might be said to be about as good as another's.

Even though the area of public relations is a broad and general one, there may be certain combinations of plays which we can define and which in turn will help you to win the game. The ground rules themselves are almost blasé in their simplicity, namely: sincerity, accuracy, honesty, and communication.

Let me give you one definition of public relations which has been rather widely accepted, "Public relations is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with the public interest, and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance." I hope that I may be able to show you that there is even more involved in public relations than this definition includes.

Because public relations is such a broad field, involving such a wide variety of concepts and activities, it may never be possible for any one man, or even a small group of men, to be expert in all of them. However, don't let that worry you in the least. You are involved in public relations just as I am, and there is not a thing you can do about it.

Because both you and I work for tax-supported units of government, perhaps we are more conscious of public opinion than are those who work for private business or enterprise. We are well aware at the university when a member of our staff goes out into another community to make a talk or conduct a class, that he represents Purdue University, and that public opinion may be influenced by his actions as well as by his words.

Cicero once said, "What is true, simple, and sincere is most congenial to man's nature." If this philosophy can be transported to a predominant attitude on the part of management to the public, the greatest hurdle is crossed on the road to sound public relations. Public confidence is essen-
tial to public relations success. If you draw a line between public relations and public confidence, it is perhaps to make a distinction without a difference. The degree of percentage of public confidence included in public relations becomes the determining factor of the soundness of any program. It may be said that public confidence is the hardening quality of the mixture.

The simple definition of the word "frankness" is to be candid and open, to give freely and generously. From the public relations point of view it must be assumed that we are dealing in terms of "information." No public relations program can be sound and permanently effective without the element of public confidence which is born of complete candor. It is this element that is the key factor of a good public relations program.

The organization that attempts to coast through a temporary public misunderstanding of its conduct, without trying to correct such misconceptions, places its public relations in jeopardy. The old saying that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," is most applicable to the attitude of frankness as it is to all public relations considerations. The public relations man should be looked upon as a safety engineer rather than a fire chief. While it is always comforting to have a good fire department when the blaze breaks out, preventive recommendations of a good engineer often prevent costly tragedies.

The primary importance of the public relations function is to guide and interpret policies during the stages of formulation and early application. If such policies are sound and in the mutual interest of everyone, especially the general public, and if they are thoroughly understood by all, there is little danger of an adverse effect on public good will.

There is the matter of the importance of timing, also. Obviously, the time to correct a misunderstanding is when it first occurs. Industry and business have lost many battles for public favor because they gave too little information, too late. The opposites of forthright frankness are, of course, delayed inconclusive action or steadfast silence. If one cannot summon an immediate defense, the rear guard action is of little value. Our pace of life is too swift, or interest too rapidly changing for the public to wait our convenience in attempting to dispel misunderstanding. In most cases, public judgment is immediate. Unless we are prepared and able to correct misunderstandings at once we may as well take our losses and consider our lesson learned.

Generally speaking, if an organization or an individual expects others to think well of him, he must deserve their good opinion. Basically, there are two main ways in which the support of public opinion can be obtained. One, you must deserve the public support by your
actions and, two, you must let the public know the facts so they can judge your actions.

Having treated the scope and philosophy of public relations in a broad general sense, let’s get down now to some brass tacks. You have some problems, and you know it, and I know it.

Only a few days after I was asked to appear on your program, I noticed a headline in the Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette concerning a huge water main break in Jersey City, N. J. The story started out by saying, “City engineers still baffled by a gigantic break in a water main managed late today to reduce a water loss which so far has amounted to 16 million gallons. The loss caused the closing of schools and factories and for a time water pressure was so low, firemen could not have fought a blaze had it occurred.” In this story which was carried by the AP wires throughout the country, the public works director, the deputy police chief, the city health officer and other city officials were quoted. At about the same time a similar problem, on a much smaller scale, occurred in our neighboring city of Attica.

The very next day, the Hammond Times carried a story on its front page, with the headline reading, “Words Fly on Public Relations.” The story said that Hammond councilmen were widely divided on the merits of a public relations employee within the Hammond park system. Continuing to quote: “The public relations maneuver was labelled a political shenanigan by opponents. It had been proposed to eliminate the job of park foreman and to create the public relations job instead.” The newspaper quoted one councilman as saying, after lengthy discussion, “I have just heard about as big a load of poppycock as I have ever heard in my life.”

SOME SUGGESTED PROCEDURES

Yes, these are some of the problems that you and other city officials face. I don’t intend to tell you what to do when a water main breaks, or when the city councilmen become involved in politics, but using our ground rules as a foundation on which to build, perhaps I can give you some plays which may help a little bit in winning the game of public acceptance and confidence.

First of all, you have a job to do, you have a program which you must formulate and accomplish, and you need public support to get the job done. So let the people know the story, but keep it factual. Tell them how much is involved in your program and what it will accomplish. Make them feel that they are a part of it. Get them on your team!
How do you tell your story? There are several media which you can use. First of all, use the newspapers because they will reach the most people with the most lasting impact. We have been trained from childhood to pay attention to visual impressions. Closely following, are appearances over your local radio and television stations; talks before luncheon or civic clubs and P.T.A.; conversations on the street corner or over the back yard fence, and don’t overlook the schools, for here you will find the taxpayers of tomorrow.

Get acquainted with your city editor and his staff. Explain your program, but don’t go begging for columns of publicity puffs either for your pet project or for you as an individual. If your program is deserving of public support, you will find a receptive audience amidst the clatter of typewriters in a newspaper office. Yellow journalism is a thing of the past. Competition today makes it vitally important for every newspaper editor to take a wholesome, active interest in those things which are a benefit to his community.

You don’t have to be a writer, but don’t shy away from a pencil and a piece of paper like they were poison. Put the facts down in black and white, for you are dealing with dollars and dimensions as well as time.

Ben Petty had an idea that was pretty good in his travels around the state. In talking in many counties on the same general subject he prepared a general news story giving the fundamental facts, and then filled in the miles or dollars or whatever it might be for the county he was talking about.

If you have some figures or facts which are complicated, put them down on paper, take it into your city editor and sit down and talk with him about it. Try to schedule your visit so it will not interfere with one of his deadlines but will come at a time when he has a few minutes to spare, and you certainly will get a much better reception.

You don’t have to be a silver-tongued orator to appear on the radio or TV, or before a luncheon club. Simply be sure that you have the facts well in mind. Speak freely and sincerely. Don’t underestimate the intelligence of your audience, but keep in mind that they are probably not informed about your pet project. If you are accustomed to speaking before a live audience, don’t be afraid of a microphone, it won’t bite.

There is another vitally important area of public relations in which you are involved. That is the area of employee relations. Keep all of the employees in your department informed about what is going on, plans for the future, current projects, and progress of the work. They will do a better job, if the truck they drive, or the stone they lay is to them a part of an overall program. Spell out the program for the cur-
rent year, tell them what has been accomplished in the past and what is planned for the future.

Don't keep your employees in the dark. If some of your men start tearing up a street in front of someone's house, be sure that they can tell the property owner why, and in an intelligent and courteous manner. They will acquire enthusiasm for the job, and your overall public relations will vastly improve.

Good public relations are simply good human relations. So here are just a few words of caution. Don't shoot off your mouth, don't pick fights, don't antagonize the press, don't create enemies where none exist, but try to satisfy the natural curiosity of the public about what is going on or what is being done with their tax dollars.