

## Viewpoints

# If you're a key exec, PR is part of your job

By Ford Kanzler

**B**UILDING public awareness of a company and establishing its credibility shouldn't be left exclusively to public relations people. It's also an essential part of being a member of key management.

Whether your title is general manager or product manager, vice president of marketing or president, spokesmanship is a professional skill to be honed just as forecasting, budgetary control, selling and personnel administration are. The most successful managers all consider PR to be part of their job.

Every company has a public relations program. The main difference between them is whether the program results from management neglect or management planning and participation.

As an example of the first approach, consider the product manager who gets a questionnaire from a trade magazine for an industry buyer's guide issue. It languishes in the IN box for a few weeks until the deadline goes by, then gets thrown away or perhaps passed on to the communication manager or PR account executive — but the opportunity is lost.

Hicks B. Waldron, former chairman and chief executive officer of Avon Products, had no questions about the importance of public relations and management's involvement.

While at Avon, he said, about 60 percent of his time was spent on relations with the financial community, employees, the board, government officials and the press.

The written materials a company creates to communicate its messages — advertising copy, news releases, brochures — are powerful tools, but there's nothing like personal contact. At least once a year, a marketing or product manager or president should meet key publication editors and industry analysts who make a difference in the market's understanding and awareness of the company and its products. In between those face-to-face meetings, their phone calls should be handled at the highest level.

Ongoing contact and maintaining corporate or product publicity is, obviously, the PR professional's job. Managers who actively and consistently participate with their PR pros, even during rough times, will find a much more available audience for their company's message.

Ask the appropriate publication's reporters and editors covering your industry to meet with you on a background basis. Assume no story will result, but a follow-up contact may yield important coverage if you present your company or technology in an interesting way.

Understand the media's concerns. Continuity in communications is essential. Reporters and editors deal with a large number and a wide variety of things every day and very week. They can't be experts on everything. Additionally, they've been misled and lied to many times. Because of that, they have more than a healthy dose of skepticism. One of the main complaints media people have about business executives is that "they only want to talk about their new product." The analogy here is: If you never go to the well or only go there once in great while, you can't expect people there to know you.

When continuity exists, public relations involves the appropriate key manager and is a natural part of his or her job. The executive creates a relationship with influential people in his or her market just as he or she would with key customers.

Involvement by top managers in the public relations process is not self-aggrandizement. It is a strategic opportunity to fill a void for a spokesperson for an industry. This equals leadership, which translates into bottom-line benefits. And the beauty of industry spokesmanship is that you don't have to be the market share leader to play the industry spokesperson role.

Being a "public person" and a professional manager means you have opinions on topics important to your market. Express them. It is an opportunity to personalize the company, give it a face and differentiate it from its competitors. Because managers like Lee Iacocca of Chrysler or Apple Computer's John Sculley see themselves as personifying the company, others see them the same way. But you don't have to be a manager in a billion-dollar-plus corporation to behave the same way.

Respected business leaders realize that, if they don't speak for themselves, someone else, perhaps a competitor, will. The marketplace will define you if you don't define yourself.

Management needs public relations. Successful managers know that one of their most valuable assets is the credibility they have earned among customers, employees, lenders, shareholders and even suppliers. However, too few understand that earning credibility with the media is equally important. It is through the media that important audiences form opinions about companies and their managements.

Modern managers have abandoned the idea of keeping a low profile and hiding behind doors. Consent, consensus and communication — with government, employees, customers and shareholders — are the bywords today. Consent and consensus take candor, visibility, credibility and well-practiced communications skills. It's part of management's job.

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