The Impact of Public Relations

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According to DefineThat.com, public relations is a form of communication primarily directed toward gaining public understanding and acceptance. Public relations usually deals with issues rather than products or services, and is used to build goodwill with the public or an organization's employees. Public relations may include employee training, the support of charitable events, or even a press release concerning positive community involvement about an organization. Public relations influences the behavior of society and anyone who has an effect on the organization's performance. (This includes customers, employees, shareholders, voters, government regulators, special interest groups, and so on.) This paper discusses the impacts of public relations (PR) on society and my individual views.

**Impacts of PR on Society**

Society is impacted by public relations in a number of ways. PR can steer the public opinion in the direction an organization would like it to go. The way an organization handles its mistakes are often just as important as what it does to prevent them. How a company handles product recalls through public relations can greatly affect the affect of its business. Product recalls can destroy a company name.

According to an article written by Tamara Kaplan, entitled *The Tylenol Crisis*, in 1982, McNeil Consumer Products, a subsidiary of Johnson & Johnson, was confronted with a crisis when seven people on Chicago's West Side died mysteriously. Authorities
determined that each of the people died from ingesting an Extra-Strength Tylenol capsule laced with cyanide. The news of this incident traveled fast, and was the cause of nationwide panic. These poisonings made it necessary for Johnson & Johnson to launch a public relations program immediately, in order to save the integrity of both their product and their corporation as a whole. The company immediately alerted consumers across the nation, via the media, not to consume any type of Tylenol product. They told consumers not to resume using the product until the extent of the tampering could be determined. Johnson & Johnson, along with stopping the production and advertising of Tylenol, recalled all Tylenol capsules from the market. The recall included approximately 31 million bottles of Tylenol, with a retail value of more than 100 million dollars. Along with the nationwide alert and the Tylenol recall, Johnson & Johnson established relations with the Chicago Police, the FBI, and the Food and Drug Administration. This way the company could have a part in searching for the person who laced the Tylenol capsules and they could help prevent further tamperings. Johnson & Johnson was given much positive coverage for their handling of this crisis. By handling its recall strategically, Johnson & Johnson lessened their negative impact, and in the long run, proved the company was trustworthy. The company addressed all the stages of the Tylenol recall, from readiness before the fact to product reintroduction after the recall ended. Had Tylenol not used public relations, the brand name Tylenol would likely no longer have been trusted.

PR can affect legislation. PR can influence policy in the public sector or among special interest groups in the community. Through public involvement, coalition
building, lobbying and campaigns, an organization can win public approval to reach its goals and success.

PR can take into account an organization's social accountability when it comes to the environment or resources. Take for example EPA's Clean Air Excellence Awards Program. The program was established at the recommendation of the Clean Air Act Advisory Committee, and annually recognizes and honors outstanding, innovative efforts that help to make progress in achieving cleaner air. PR can also be detrimental to society and the environment, however. For example, a chemical company could promote its organization as being good, and gain the general acceptance of the public where the organization sought to expand to. Hypothetically, perhaps the chemical company was dumping waste in a river nearby the city it inhabited, and the waste over a number of years caused cancer in several residents of the city. Public relations might pay the residents' medical bills in order to keep them quiet, at least for a while.

PR can also guide management during times of change, such as in the case of corporate downsizing. An example of this is Stoughton Trailers based in Stoughton, Wisconsin. A few years ago, the company endured difficult economic times. In fact, it almost completely closed its operations in Evansville, Wisconsin, and began laying off employees at its main facility in Stoughton. Stoughton Trailers kept its employees aware of its financial position its employees were informed that Stoughton had, in fact, kept laborers working without any orders up to $1,000,000 in debt. While reaching this maximum debt, the company encouraged staff to offer suggestion and keep open communication with management. Once layoffs began, remaining management kept in
contact with staff. Each employee was called every few weeks and updated on the company's status. Because the company kept in close contact with the workers before and during the layoff period, many of the laborers returned several months to over a year later to their jobs when business began to increase. In short, the organization showed appreciation for its staff, and by showing that appreciation it paid off on the bottom line in a reduction of future training costs when the company was finally able to rehire its employees.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I think that public relations can be good for an organization as well as society, especially when an organization conducts what I like to call “genuine public relations.” If public relations are sugar coated and there is a serious ulterior motive on behalf of the company, the truth is known eventually. Usually, the company is exposed and their good name tarnished. With companies wanting to stay in business as long as possible, and wanting to make as much money as possible, learning how to correctly deal with the public is important for a company's overall longevity. Stoughton Trailers made a decision that cost them $1,000,000 at least in the short run, but in the long run they gained the acceptance of their staff and dollars saved in retraining and rehiring costs. Johnson and Johnson made a decision that cost them millions of dollars in the short run, but in the long run by “doing the right thing” and pulling approximately 31 million bottles of Tylenol from their shelves impacted the public. It was that kind of impact that saved each company’s brand name and company reputation.
References
Kaplan, Tamara. The Tylenol Crisis: How Effective Public Relations Saved Johnson & Johnson. Retrieved 1 November 2003 from the world wide web: