**Public Relations: The Process**

It isn't enough to know what public relations is and what purposes it serves. To practice public relations, one must understand the process by which public relations operates. As we have already discussed, public relations goes far beyond the task of producing messages. An effective public relations effort is the result of mutual understanding between an organization and its publics. The development of this understanding can be regarded as a four-step process:

**Research**

An initial fact-finding stage defines the problem areas and differentiates between publics.

**Planning**

Once the facts have been gathered from the various publics, decisions must be made regarding their importance and potential impact on the organization. After these decisions are made, strategies must be developed to enable the organization to achieve its goals.

**Action and Communication Strategies**

Action and Communication strategies are implemented as new organizational policies and/or projects. Messages are then constructed to reach target publics.

**Evaluation**

Once a public relations campaign is developed and implemented, it should be followed by an evaluation of its effectiveness in meeting the criteria that were set. The results of the evaluation are used both to assess the effectiveness of the effort and to plan future action.

These four steps are essential to any effective public relations campaign. They are not, however, four independent functions. Each step overlaps the others; if any one of them is neglected, the entire process will be affected.

**Public relations process:**

* recognizes there are always opportunities to serve internal or external clients better, faster and less-expensively.
* accepts that client service can be measured and improved.
* understands that people serve clients and not computers. Hence, process helps public relations professionals use technology well.
* uses widely available computer/software and online technologies to serve clients better, faster and less expensively.

Keys to public relations process include:

**People:** People use online and electronic software/hardware tools to serve clients. If they don't know a tool, they cannot provide services well or at all, OR service they provide is incomplete and expensive.

**Training:** A software package like *Microsoft Office* can serve clients in ways that are beyond the skills of many public relations professionals. A common word processing package provides tools that many public relations professionals cannot use. Training guides professionals to better, faster and less expensive ways of using software/hardware tools they might have already.

**Focus:** Public relations process focuses on tasks that professionals must do today and shows them how to work better, faster and less expensively while serving clients. Classroom training is a poor substitute for on-the-job guidance. A public relations professional is no different from anyone else. What seems easy in a classroom suddenly becomes difficult on deadline and under client pressure.

**Leadership:** Change comes from the top. If a public relations executive is determined to provide better client service through process, it will happen. If the executive ignores process, change will not occur.

**Persistence:** Anyone who has helped professionals change work practices knows that it is hard work requiring patience and endurance. There are failures. The key is to stay with a change until it becomes comfortable behavior.

**Measurement:** Public relations process estimates gains from changing a process before the change is made and tracks benefits after the change is implemented.

When is Public Relations used?

You use public relations process constantly. You might not be aware of processes you use for serving clients. If you type on a computer, that is a process. If you maintain a Rolodex, that is a process. If you talk on a phone, another process. If you go to meetings, process again. Some of your activities are efficient, and some are not. Some things you do serve your clients well, and some could be better.

You should examine public relations processes annually and schedule improvements. Even a process that you have improved can be bettered over time as you understand how you work and what more you can do to serve clients better, faster and less expensively.