

CASE PROBLEM 5

Association's Public Relations Program Is Questioned

The Situation:

You are the relatively new public relations director for the National Association of Security System Distributors, a large national trade association. The association has had a slow (average 5% per year) but steady rate of membership growth during the last five years. The industry it represents was subject to considerable public criticism about a decade ago and it was at that time that the professional public relations function was added to the administrative structure of the organization. Members are companies that distribute security systems for residential and commercial purposes and include a substantial representation of both retailers and wholesalers. The industry has been affected dramatically by new technologies and by mail order competitors whose products are sometimes inferior. Recent negative publicity about security systems being defeated easily by burglars has been primarily based on the experience of the public with these "non-member" competitors.

Your predecessor has developed a public relations program which now costs \$300,000 a year, exclusive of staff salaries and overhead, to maintain without any innovations. You have a staff of four professionals and a public relations committee of 18 (volunteer) members which meets quarterly.

The association's public relations program seems to cover most of the industry's key publics but association members still complain that the industry's image is not improving. Some members suggest that the entire public relations program should be scrapped, the department and your job abolished, and the money spent in "beefing-up" the government relations activities of the association. Others suggest that one part or another of the program be dropped and the money transferred to other uses. Some favor some type of a crash image-building program and are urging you to start an institutional advertising program.

Members have indicated that they would not agree to a special assessment nor to a dues increase to support the expansion of the public relations program. Their attitude seems to be "make do with your budget."

You have tried, in the year that you have been with the association, to defend the old program and to show that the association has improved its image considerably with certain key publics. Members, however, point to occasional negative media stories that appear about the industry and say the program is not doing its job.

There is some evidence that the program has tended to improve the image of the association with some key publics but not all. There seems to be little, if any, transfer of this improved image to the member companies.

The Situation (Continued):

Your boss, the executive vice president, says she will support you in anything you propose to address this situation but suggests that it is your problem to come up with a plan for what needs to be done.

Read all following steps, then proceed.

Step One

Describe the formal and informal research that is needed. Identify a source of information and rationale for each activity that is recommended.

Findings from your research:

- The retail members seem to be less satisfied with the public image of the industry than the wholesale members.
- Sales statistics for the domestic retail market show a 12% rise in the past 18 months while wholesale sales figures indicate a 27% rise during the same period but include both domestic and international sales.
- Association services most valued by members are: 1) *New Trends in Security Technology*, the association's trade journal; 2) the annual trade show; and 3) the product certification program.
- The association activity most widely supported but least understood is the Political Action Committee.
- The image of the industry is seen as a problem by smaller less-profitable companies but not by larger more profitable ones.
- The public at large has a very mixed image of the importance of residential security systems. 15% said they believed the use of such a system alerts burglars to the fact that valuables are kept in the residence; 21% said there was nothing in their residence worth enough to warrant such a system; 24% said that security systems were not worth what they cost because burglars can get around them; and 40% said they thought residential security systems were a useful safety precaution that would make a residence an undesirable target for burglars. Only 13% of those questioned owned and used a residential security system.
- The patent office reports that 34 new security devices have received patents in the past two years.

Step 2: In light of what you have learned, draft a broad goal for your communications effort – the end result you will hope to achieve for the company.

Step 3: Identify five (5) key publics, audiences or constituent groups to be included in your communications plan.

Step 4: Select one of those groups. Write one short-term and one long-term objective for your communications plan to address that target group and work toward your goal.

- Step 5:** Write two strategies to address that group, telling how you will work toward your objective.
- Step 6:** Write your main message for that group at this time.
- Step 7:** Identify three tactics or tools you will use to carry out your strategies. Identify which strategy each tactic is intended to carry out. (Your tactics may be the same for both strategies; they may be different.)
- Step 8:** Determine a spokesperson for each tactic.
- Step 9:** Estimate the costs associated with each tactic, including out-of-pocket expense, staff or volunteer time and in-kind donations.
- Step 10:** Draft a timetable for your communications plan. Set up a Gantt chart or some other device to show concisely how your plan will proceed.
- Step 11:** Consider how and when you will evaluate progress toward your short-term and long-term objective, and add that to your timetable. Where will you provide an opportunity for correcting your course, if that appears strategic?
- Step 12:** Determine how and when you will evaluate progress toward your overall goal, and add that to your timetable.