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Finding the Right Thing to Do: A User's Guide to Public Relations Success

In every new venture, in every crisis—in every brush with fame or ignominy—there are always those moments when you think: What should I do now? How can I manage this situation or mend that reputation? What's the best way to raise my profile or attract media attention? What, in today's circumstance, is the right thing to do?

In lots of little and specific ways, this book proposes to answer that question. The following pages are filled with tactics and techniques that have proven to be “right” for us and for many others.

But the practice of public relations is much more than the sum of these parts, because getting—and keeping—a good reputation is not purely a question of tactics. No matter how clever your communications team, you cannot *create* credibility or *instill* confidence. Reputations are not built on press releases and glossy brochures. They are built on performance. If, in this age of cynicism, you want employee loyalty, consumer trust, and a degree of public regard, you have to earn it. And once you have it, you cannot neglect it.

You also want the reputation you deserve—no more and certainly no less. This is a matter of balance. A good and widespread reputation will serve the goals of most businesses and individuals. But you don't want your reputation to get

ahead of reality. Sudden and widespread acclaim can be great for stock promoters whose goal is to make a quick buck and move on to the next play. But undeserved fame can be a long-term disaster for a company that can't meet inflated expectations. Many individuals have felt the devastating sting of a disappointed public. Many corporations with perfectly sustainable business models have watched their profits tank when the market concluded that corporate promises couldn't be believed.

So, before you jump to the tips—the public relations tactics that we employ day to day—it might help to know something about the Hoggan approach, something about our overarching public relations strategy. Over 30 years, we have developed a unique prism through which we look at everything we do. It's a test, comprised of three guiding rules.

1. Do the right thing.
2. Be seen to be doing the right thing.
3. Don't get #1 and #2 mixed up.

This is simple and complicated at the same time. Doing the right thing is fundamental; and in a small town, it might actually be enough. No one needs communications advice when everyone is already well acquainted, just as no one can rescue the reputation of a small town grocer who overcharges or a barber who can't cut hair.

But in our world—in a populous, complex, media-dominated society—you can't sit around and assume that everyone will notice that you have done something right, or stopped doing something wrong. You must take your reputation in your own hands. You must make sure that people see when you are doing the right thing.

That said; you'll find nothing but grief if you get caught pandering— if you pretend to do the right thing or if the public begins to believe you are making positive changes only because you have been forced to do so. All the world may be a stage, but

if people think you're play acting, you're apt to discover how quickly and easily a good reputation can be lost.

At some point, finding the right thing to do is a values judgment. If you can keep that in mind, this book will help you do the rest.

What Is Public Relations, Anyway?

This is a question that might seem obvious to most business people—particularly to those of you who have hired public relations consultants in the past. Depending on your experience, you might think that public relations is what you do when you are trying to get out of trouble or into the news. Many businesspeople who are generally confident in their own abilities still call for help in a crisis. Many acknowledge the value that public relations people can bring in getting public attention: everything from creating and distributing press releases and kits to media training and media relations. Businesses are also inclined to turn to PR agencies for things like speech writing or event coordination, for investor relations, or reputation management. And sophisticated businesses will have had experience with public relations preoccupations like “key messages” and “positioning,” taking advantage of skills in what we think of as storytelling.

But that touches on some of what public relations people do, without answering why they do it. It canvases tactics without getting to the central question: What is public relations?

Here's one answer: Public relations is the art and science of earning credibility and building goodwill among all those who are important to your business.

Public relations is not advertising and it's not spin. It is not the practice of backslapping guys with big-checked sport coats and damp hands—people who would peddle their influence with malleable members of the media or use questionable tactics to manipulate public opinion over the short term. On the contrary, those are the people who have done the most damage in the past to the reputation of the public relations industry itself

and to the reputations of the companies and institutions that they once served.

They were sometimes successful in making a name for their companies, but they too often found that fame was a double-edged sword. Good public relations is about ensuring that as you develop your reputation, you do so for the right reasons. And if you already have a high public profile, it's about managing your reputation, through good times and bad.

If achieving credibility and goodwill are the goals, then mutual understanding is a fundamental building block. You have to start with a clear grasp of your own ambitions—and your role in the community. You must understand how your goals and the community's values overlap (or conflict), and you must have a sense of what people in the community expect—what they have a right to expect – from you. By working this out—by discovering exactly where the public interest intersects with your own goals—you can set the best direction for your business and design a communication strategy that will win the greatest amount of public support.

In this process, you cannot hope to communicate at your audience. All good conversations run two ways. You must be able to articulate your own position in a clear and engaging way. But most people won't listen long to someone who isn't listening back. So, in addition to making your own case well, you must listen. You must pay attention to your audience's position, and you must monitor whether and to what degree they are hearing and understanding what you are trying to say. Finally, you must be willing to allow the conversation—and perhaps your position—to change in the process. Only by being responsive will you show your good faith.

This is particularly important in the current climate of mistrust. People are not just tired of cute advertising and glib public relations spin—they are openly hostile to it. They have grown disillusioned and distrustful—and if people don't trust you, it is very difficult for them to hear what you are saying.

The Internet has also made communications more challenging. You can no longer hunker down in a crisis and plan

an unhurried response. If you hesitate in this age of hyper-awareness, the bloggers will define the story before you even begin. It has always been the case that the first person who gets out with new information “frames” the story, creating in the minds of the audience an impression that is difficult to update or contradict. Today, more than ever in history, you have to react fast to be first.

You also have to establish your credibility, something that is done best when you are not reacting to events. Given public cynicism, you must start by being transparent. That doesn’t mean laying bare trade secrets. It means building a reputation for honesty—for speaking the truth when it serves you, and especially, acknowledging the truth when it hurts.

You can’t do this one time and think it will be enough. Stakeholders, shareholders, clients and customers—audience members of whatever kind—will give you their trust in measured doses. You can’t buy credibility or invent it overnight. You have to earn it. You have to establish your reputation carefully and over time.

Then, if people feel they know you—if they understand your goals and priorities—they won’t be surprised when you try to defend your interests. They may even be sympathetic. If people trust you, if they find that you are clear and forthright in your positions, they are more likely to find your arguments persuasive. They will give you the benefit of the doubt.

The wrinkle in all of this is that communicating with a broad public audience is infinitely more complex than, say, gathering your executive team together for a planning session or a briefing. Communications can be tricky enough in your personal and private relationships. We all know the joys and frustrations of trying to make ourselves understood to our spouses, our parents, or our children.

But the rules change when you start dealing, at Internet speeds, with crowds—with people who don’t know you and have no reason to trust what you say. The most complicating factor of all is the participation—the sometimes infuriating but often essential participation—of the media. No matter how good

you think you are as a communicator, if you have relationships with the media, you need to put some specific energy into building this unique and necessary skill set.

There are many facets to good public relations—communications and research, crisis planning and management, media relations and public speaking. Some are more complicated than others and some are more critical in certain circumstances. But none is a frill.

The civilized world exists largely on goodwill. We communicate, we collaborate, we cooperate. We build small businesses, huge industries, and great halls for entertainment and governance. We do so in our own interest and in the “public interest.”

Ultimately, public relations is the process of aligning those interests for everyone’s benefit. And if that’s what you’re trying to do, this is the best way to do it:

Ethical Public Relations: The Golden Rules

There is an old story, perhaps apocryphal, about a wealthy New York businessman who hires a senior public relations consultant. The businessman calls the consultant into the first meeting and says, “I have a reputation for being a real S.O.B. and I want you to change that.”

The PR consultant responds: “Absolutely. But first you’ll have to stop being an S.O.B.”

The moral is this: You don’t come by your reputation accidentally. For good or ill, you earn it. Whether as a single individual or a large organization, odds are that sooner or later you will wind up with the reputation that you deserve.

But, just because you don’t get a reputation accidentally, doesn’t mean that you might not acquire one inadvertently or—sometimes worse—that you may never establish a reputation at all.

If you care about your public image—and if you are not satisfied to have that image defined by critics and competitors—-you must come back to our three steps.

1. Do the Right Thing

This is not just a moral injunction. Doing the right thing may speak to your values and your integrity. But it is also a strategy for success.

I came to this conclusion early in my career. At least, I noticed early how dangerous it was to think you could do something less than the right thing and still maintain a good reputation. Specifically, I noticed that every time someone tried to delay or dilute the release of bad news, things tended to go straight downhill. The media grew restless and hostile; and when the information finally came out (as it usually did), the crisis got worse.

I also noticed that when people did the right thing, when they stepped up quickly, acknowledging a problem, posing a solution, and setting out a plan to make sure a crisis wouldn't recur—things almost invariably got better. I found, again and again, that the public is remarkably receptive to a sincere apology; that people will forgive almost anything but deceit. I found that doing the right thing was business strategy that works.

It works in a crisis, and it works the rest of the time, too. A good reputation comes from doing the right thing all the time.

Mind you, recognizing “the right thing” is part of the challenge. We all can tell the difference between the unadorned truth and a carefully conceived lie, even if the latter can seem like a tempting way to put off trouble. But sometimes what's right is a matter of perspective. Something that looks right from an efficiency standpoint might not be right when it comes to safety. What's right for a short-term investor—what you think is right for the bottom line today—might not serve the company's reputation over time, creating a situation in which you reap an economic gain in the short term only to surrender even more value down the road.

Our agency periodically gets called in by companies that want our help introducing a particular proposal to the public. Often, the company has decided on a plan without consulting very widely and has suddenly found itself with a “public

relations problem.” We generally respond in these circumstances with a round of research—formal or informal—and often we find a sharp difference of opinion as to what might be considered the right thing to do.

At such times—and in times of crisis—“doing the right thing” can be a real test of character. For example, Hoggan & Associates won a Silver Anvil Award (one of the PR industry’s highest honors) for our work with an organic food store called Capers, now a subsidiary of Whole Foods. Capers discovered that an employee who had served in food preparation was suffering from Hepatitis A—a worrisome piece of information that community health officials shared immediately with the public. Management’s first response was to shut down the food preparation area for all of Capers’ deli counters—a decision that was not at all “right” for their short-term business, but one that quickly impressed customers with Capers’ determination to put safety ahead of profit. The Capers brand is stronger today than ever. (For a more complete description, see chapter 7.)

There is another side to this argument, a side that speaks directly to the cynicism of today’s most opportunistic companies. The great American critic and journalist H.L. Mencken once said that, “No one in this world has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people.” And the tobacco peddlers at Philip Morris and the swindlers at Enron have taken advantage of that fact. They did what was right for them, regardless of whether it was—in any responsible way—the right thing to do. They made a specialty out of a certain, highly questionable kind of public relations and they proved that deceit can work—for a while. But I believe that good guys win in the end.

I also believe that Mencken may have been wrong about the intelligence of crowds. People sometimes do foolish things, but you’re courting disaster if you treat them like fools.

Malcolm Gladwell, the talented staff writer for the *New Yorker* magazine, offered one explanation in his bestseller, *Blink*. In his introduction, Gladwell said that his book is about “rapid cognition, about the kind of thinking that happens in a blink of

an eye.” He said, “When you meet someone for the first time, or walk into a house you are thinking of buying, or read the first few sentences of a book, your mind takes about two seconds to jump to a series of conclusions.”

Gladwell argues that these conclusions, which seem intuitive rather than rational, are often remarkably accurate. That’s because what seems like intuition is often something more: it is a reaction that is informed by a lifetime of experience, a lifetime of reading faces and assessing the credibility of information. I think there might be something else besides, because in my experience, people have an uncanny ability to sense a fraud. In a climate of mistrust, people have learned to recognize authenticity.

Again, spin might work for a while. Like a magician, you can sometimes catch the crowd looking the other way—for a while. But if your business plan doesn’t involve a hasty, late-night departure from town, there is no substitute for doing the right thing.

2. Be Seen to be Doing the Right Thing

We live in a complicated world—a world in which everyone seems to be competing for attention, a world in which every individual is overwhelmed by messages and images. In such a world, you cannot leave your reputation to chance. You cannot stand by while people with competing interests define your issue—or your company. You cannot hope that your clients, customers, or stakeholders will understand your position if you have not presented it forcefully, expertly, and in the right context and venues.

As for the media, it would be quaint but naïve to believe that they are there only to pass on objective information. Reporters bring their own perspective—and the pressures of their own highly competitive business. They must sell a product and the appeal of that product often depends on things like conflict. There is no reason to think ill of the media, to fear or resent reporters and editors. But you have to remember that they have

their own agenda, and it doesn't necessarily include the careful dissemination of your message.

In such an environment—in communicating with a disillusioned and skeptical public—you can't just do the right thing and hope that someone will notice. Actions may speak louder than words, but in the crowded media conversation of today, your actions can be overlooked or badly misunderstood.

This becomes tricky on two counts. First, no one likes a braggart, and second, unless you have already built a reputation for integrity, any effort to tout your own strengths may actually attract negative attention. But remember, this is not about being boastful or being a media hound. It's a matter of making sure that the people who are important to your business know what you are doing.

Sometimes, you will need help—testimonials from credible people who are willing to speak up on your behalf. But remember this too: in order to win that validation—in order to attract reputable leaders who are willing to confirm your credibility—you need to be doing the right thing. Which leads to the third point.

3. Don't Get #1 and #2 Mixed Up

This is the tricky bit. If you do the right thing because it's the right thing to do, people will respect you for it. But if you forget yourself in a flurry of PR tactics and strategies—if you start thinking primarily about the public relations implications of your actions, and only secondarily about what's right—things can easily go wrong.

In other words, people want to see you doing the right thing; they don't want to see you doing PR. So, keep #1 and #2 in order. Do the right thing for its own sake—and then think about the best way to make sure that the people who are important to your business hear about it.

A Strategy for Every Day

We come once again to the suggestion that public relations is inevitably tied up with decisions about values—about right and

wrong. That is not necessarily the case. There are lots of occasions—probably a huge majority—in which your tactical decisions have nothing to do with a values judgment about what is right or wrong. For example, writing a speech, preparing a brochure, giving media training or presentation tips to the CEO, organizing a news conference: there are hundreds of things you can do that are just good effective tactics in the search for fair play in the media and for understanding from your stakeholder groups.

It's also true that even though you try, every day, to do what is right, things will still go wrong. People will make mistakes, machinery will break down. Communications challenges—and opportunities—will come and go. You won't be facing a gut-wrenching decision about right and wrong—you'll just be staring into a crowd of reporters, or shareholders, who all want to hear the news.

Sometimes, too, there is no obvious right answer that will bring everyone back to your side. Sometimes there are legitimate differences of opinion as to what's right and wrong. Sometimes there are irreconcilable differences among people of good faith. Nobody said business was going to be easy.

But that still leaves a risk for everyone who is engaged in the practice of public relations. When the going gets tough, it's hard to avoid obsessing about the tactics and strategies of reputation management—and forgetting about the big picture. It's tempting to flip to the appropriate page and seek out the tip that will put your company in the best possible light, regardless of whether it involves actually doing the right thing.

When you get to that moment—of obsession or desperation—stop, if only for a moment, and think about the three rules. Ask yourself whether the decision you are about to make would attract the support of your reasonable critics—whether they will think that it was the right thing to do. If the answer is yes, you will have a strong foundation on which to build a good reputation.

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That brings us back, finally and again, to the fundamental question: What is public relations? For us, it is the art of figuring out the right thing to do and—in the most complex communications environment the world has ever known—letting people know that we are doing it.

We have already made the point that spin doesn't work in a small town—that poor performance can't prevail when people are keeping track. Well, our world—vast, crowded, and confusing though it may be—is becoming more and more like a small town. The breadth, scope, and speed of communications are removing the protection of distance. The age of secrets is coming to an end.

The world is also becoming less physically forgiving. There are no longer any new seas to discover or new forests to plunder. There is only one huge and increasingly crowded planet whose finite resources we overspend at our peril.

In this age of awareness and accountability, the golden rules of public relations will do more than save your reputation; they may well save us all.

So:

1. Do the right thing.
2. Be seen to be doing the right thing; and
3. Don't get #1 and #2 mixed up.

If you take nothing else away from this book, take that. Your clients, customers, shareholders, stakeholders, partners, employees—their children and their children's children—will all thank you for it.