# Ron Smith Public Relations the basics

ROUTLEL

## PUBLIC RELATIONS

### THE BASICS

*Public Relations: The Basics* is a highly readable introduction to one of the most exciting and fast-paced media industries. Both the practice and profession of public relations are explored and the focus is on those issues which will be most relevant to those new to the field:

- The four key phases of public relations campaigns: research, strategy, tactics and evaluation.
- History and evolution of public relations.
- Basic concepts of the profession: ethics, professionalism and theoretical underpinnings.

Contemporary international case studies are woven throughout the text ensuring that the book is relevant to a global audience. It also features a glossary and an appendix on first steps towards a career in public relations making this book the ideal starting point for anyone new to the study of public relations.

**Ron Smith** is professor of public communication at Buffalo State (SUNY), where he has served as department chair and associate dean for the School of Arts and Humanities. A public relations practitioner accredited by the Public Relations Society of America, he is the author of *Strategic Planning for Public Relations, Becoming a Public Relations Writer* and (as co-author) *Media Writing.* 

#### The Basics

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## PUBLIC RELATIONS THE BASICS

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First published 2014 by Routledge 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada by Routledge 711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data Smith, Ronald D., 1948-Public relations : the basics / Ron Smith. pages cm. – (The basics) 1. Public relations. I. Title. HM1221.S769 2013 659.2–dc23

2013005178

ISBN: 978-0-415-67584-0 (hbk) ISBN: 978-0-415-67583-3 (pbk) ISBN: 978-0-203-79890-4 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo and Scala Sans by Taylor and Francis Books

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## Part I Understanding Public Relations

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### A FIRST LOOK AT PUBLIC RELATIONS

This chapter introduces you to the profession of public relations: What it is. What it isn't. It outlines the practical benefits that public relations offers organizations and society at large It also introduces the ethical base of the art and science of public relations.

Understanding public relations is something like the story from ancient India about the blind men and the elephant. The parable tells of six blind men, each feeling a different part of an elephant. One touched the side and thought it was a wall. Another touched the tusk and thought it was a spear. The man touching the trunk thought he had a snake. And so on: The knee a tree trunk, the tail a rope, the ear a fan.

The story points out the pitfall of looking only at parts and not perceiving the whole. Public relations is like that. Public relations is publicity and research, special events and speeches. It is strategy and evaluation, community partnering and fundraising. But none of these, individually, reveals the totality of what public relations is about.

Some people see corporations hiding safety information from workers or covering up inept decisions by managers. They see

politicians deceptively attacking opponents with money from unnamed backers. By focusing only on such negatives, the critics fail to see the benefits that public relations provides to society.

So what is public relations about? That's the focus of this book.

Public relations is one of the **humanities**. It is an aspect of culture with ethical norms and a social perspective as an element capable of uplifting society and making sense of human experience. As such, it is associated with language and philosophy.

Public relations also is associated with the **arts**, particularly through the important role that design and visual communication plays in the discipline.

Finally, public relations is a **science**, specifically an applied social science with theoretical models based in research, driven by data, and focused on solving a practical problem.

Together, these concepts of public relations set the stage for looking at a discipline that helps us understand society and human behavior.

#### WHAT PUBLIC RELATIONS IS NOT

Many misunderstandings surround public relations. Some are understandable, the result of confusion or outdated information, or perhaps only partial information (the elephant analogy). Other misunderstandings seem more deliberate, the result of willfully looking only at the dark side and believing that the worst example is the norm.

Delusions and misconceptions? Or untruths and lies? We'll use a term with more neutral nuance and call these erroneous statements **fallacies**. These simply are false, no blame implied. It may seem unusual to begin a book with a list of criticisms, but by airing these fallacies we can actually glimpse a bit of the positive side of public relations.

Fallacy: PR equates to lying, hype and exaggeration.

Reality: Truth is a foundation of public relations. "That's just PR" overlooks the standard of verifiable performance and sees only the illusion of smoke and mirrors. If public relations was so negative, it couldn't last. After all, you can put perfume on a skunk, but it's still

a skunk. Public relations is about accuracy, honesty and information in context.

Fallacy: PR is just a form of propaganda.

Reality: Propaganda lives in a world of half-truths, innuendo, misrepresentation and hidden bias. Public relations focuses on the polar opposites. Once the two terms ("propaganda" and "public relations") were used interchangeably, so it's not hard to understand that some people have not updated themselves on the nuances of the terms or the fact that no reputable public relations professional engages in anything like propaganda.

Fallacy: PR is secretive and insidious.

Reality: Stonewalling means trying to hide information or delay its release. Public relations seeks to work with journalists and others to tell an accurate and timely story about their organizations. But much of the work of public relations is behind the scenes: researching, advising, counseling, strategizing, planning. So it is generally off the radar for most journalists and other observers. However, secretive means uncommunicative, and public relations is anything but. Open, honest and timely communication is at the heart of public relations.

Fallacy: PR tries to keep the public ignorant about what's really happening.

Reality: Public relations flourishes only in a democracy, wherein many voices participate in debate on public issues. It enables people or organizations with different viewpoints to advocate and argue toward consensus—or, if that isn't forthcoming, at least toward a fair policy in which the majority accommodates the concerns of the minority.

Fallacy: PR tries to control unsuspecting people.

Reality: Public relations definitely does not try to control anyone. It couldn't even if it tried, because mind control doesn't work, at

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least not in the public arena. Public relations does, however, seek to influence. It does this by building relationships to add value to organizations by increasing willingness of publics to support rather than oppose those organizations. And that's more than a semantic difference between control and influence.

Fallacy: PR is only about spin, making bad guys look good.

Reality: The term "spin" is wrong on so many levels. It suggests a hired gun who tries to make bad things look good, or at least less bad. Rather, public relations allows organizations, advocates and individuals to openly share information, criticize policies, suggest alternatives, and otherwise engage in dialogue. Public relations serves the public interest by providing a voice for all in the court of public opinion. It advances society just as does its legal parallel, in which even people charged with a crime and presumed by some observers to be guilty deserve a vigorous defense by ethical attorneys. The court of public opinion isn't always fair. Both sides may not have equal representation, and there's no wise judge, no impartial jury to deliberate. Still, public relations gives every party an opportunity to present its case to perhaps the only jury that really matters—the public.

Fallacy: PR works only for powerful groups with deep pockets: corporations, government, lobbyists and others who work against the best interests of average people.

Reality: Public relations enhances democratic values by providing for multiple voices in the marketplace of ideas. For every cereal manufacturer advertising sugary food to kids, dozens of nonprofit groups use public relations to educate parents on childhood nutrition, to expose the false claims of the marketers, and sometimes to advocate for effective public oversight on marketing practices. The same can be said about issues from nuclear energy to workplace safety, from animal rights to climate change.

Fallacy: PR is only publicity, and nobody reads newspapers anymore.

Reality: Remember the elephant parable from the beginning of this chapter. Publicity accounts for only a small slice of the public

relations pie. Public relations is so much more. With the fragmentation of the mass media and the mushrooming of new and interactive media, organizations now can go directly to their publics without needing the assistance of journalists. "Mere PR" dismisses the profession as being inconsequential and unnecessary, neither of which is true. It also misses the point that—in addition to being skilled writers, editors, graphic designers and so on—public relations practitioners also are experts in strategy, management and other problem-solving aspects of organizational life.

Fallacy: Anybody can do PR.

Reality: It's true that public relations doesn't require a license as does dentistry, law and funeral service. So anybody can call himself or herself a PR person, and who's to disagree? But public relations is a profession rooted in research, ethics, strategic planning and evaluation, as well as effective written, spoken and visual communication. It is based on a course of study. So it's more appropriate to say that anybody who has acquired the skills and adopted the ethical standards can do the work of public relations.

Fallacy: PR is the guy with the shovel following the elephants in a circus parade.

Reality: Sometimes public relations is asked to clean up the mess caused by others, usually managers who made bad decisions with even worse consequences, often because they failed to consider public relations perspectives before they acted. But rather than being the band aid (to switch metaphors), public relations has become the wellness program and preventative medicine that helps avoids the problem in the first place.

Fallacy: PR has a dark history, such as campaigns to get women to smoke and books that guided the Nazi propaganda machine.

Reality: In the past, research sometimes looked at how the uneducated masses could be influenced and manipulated. That's where research was in the early 20th century. But theory and research also have

developed, as has the rest of society. It's true that an early public relations campaign aimed for social acceptance of women smokers. That was when society discriminated overtly against women and when even doctors and nurses smoked, before we learned of the associated dangers. So it's more accurate to point out that public relations, from its early foundations as a profession, has been used in many ways to uplift society and help people who have been oppressed and marginalized—and yes, to sell cigarettes and all the other consumer products that corporations provide.

(In case you haven't observed a pattern yet, professionals do not generally use the abbreviation PR. The shorthand is associated with all the misperceptions about public relations. So in this book, we consistently use the full term.)

It's easy to criticize any organization if you focus only on the excesses, exaggerations and aberrations rather than the best practices, high standards and good work. Schools? Look at all the dropouts, cost inefficiencies, bullying and poorly educated graduates. Military? Consider the rogue killers, suicide and rape. Churches, scouting programs and college athletics? All that sex abuse and underage drinking. Hospitals? Accidental patient deaths and nurses' strikes. Manufacturing companies? Plenty of pollution and inferior products. And so it goes.

Focusing only on such negatives is an exercise in paranoia. It may be fun for folks who enjoy reading about conspiracy theories, but it's not useful for understanding real-world relationships. On the other hand, it's never helpful to deny the negatives, because we learn from them. Especially, we can learn how to overcome them, relegating bad practices to the dustbin of history.

#### WHAT PUBLIC RELATIONS IS

If there's confusion about public relations, it may be because the term is used in so many different ways, many of them just plain wrong. A company advertises for a PR representative, only to have the job turn out to be a sales rep or a telemarketing caller. A restaurant has a job in PR, but only for young women with great bodies willing to wear sexy outfits. A politician wants a PR person to do opposition research to distort another candidate's record. That's definitely not public relations.

To get a real look at anything, it's always a good idea to go straight to the source. Here's what public relations people say about their profession.

Three-quarters of a century ago, Harwood Childs (Princeton University professor and founder of *Public Relations Quarterly*) wrote in his book *An Introduction to Public Opinion* this classic and still insightful definition:

Public relations as such is not the presentation of a point of view, not the art of tempering mental attitudes, nor the development of cordial and profitable relations ... . The basic problem of public relations, as I see it, is to reconcile or adjust in the public interest those aspects of our personal and corporate behavior which have a social significance.

Here are eight contemporary definitions by leading public relations organizations:

Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. Public Relations Society of America

Public relations is defined as the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its public, such development being for the benefit of the practice of public relations in commerce, industry, central and local government, nationalised undertakings, professional, trade and voluntary organisations and all practitioners and others concerned in or with public relations.

International Public Relations Association

Public relations is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organizations' leaders, and implementing planning programmes of action which will serve both the organization and the public interest.

World Assembly of Public Relations Associations

Public relations is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation (or individual) and its (or their) publics. It's the key to effective

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communication in all sectors of business, government, academic and not-for-profit.

Public Relations Institute of Australia

Public relations is the management, through communication, of perceptions and strategic relationships between an organization and its internal and external stakeholders.

Public Relations Institute of South Africa

Public relations is the discipline that looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between an organization and its publics.

Chartered Institute of Public Relations, United Kingdom

Public relations is the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals and serve the public interest.

Canadian Public Relations Society

Public relations is the discipline that looks after reputation with the aim of earning understanding and support, and influencing opinion and behavior.

#### Middle East Public Relations Association

There isn't a single definition because the profession is still evolving. But nowhere in these definitions do you find room for untruth or propaganda, exaggerations or stonewalling, publicity stunts or media gimmicks. Rather, the definitions of public relations, as they are articulated by the leading professional organizations in the field, all focus on strategic management, organizational goals, mutual understanding, goodwill and public interest.

Rather than giving readers of this book another definition, here is a narrative about the attributes of contemporary public relations. These qualities apply equally to corporations and nonprofit organizations and social causes, and to endeavors both large and small.

Public relations operates on a principle of *mutual benefits*; that is, it seeks not only to assist the sponsoring organization but also to

advantage its publics. It is committed to the *public interest* and the betterment of society.

All communication associated with public relations adheres to high *ethical standards* of honesty, accuracy, decency and truth. Growing numbers of organizations have clear credos or *codes of ethics* outlining such commitments.

Public relations operates with *transparency* in an open environment, aligning itself with *democratic ideals* of the right of people to know the source of messages and to accept or reject those messages. It appreciates *diversity* and the cultural distinction of its publics, and particularly respects the rights and dignity of minorities within its publics.

Spurred both by regulation and customer demand, organizations must be *accountable* to their publics. Most publics are increasing their expectations for *quality performance* and *open communication*. Organizations are successful only to the extent that they perform at a high level, delivering quality products and services. All organizations operate in a *competitive environment*. Publics besought by rivals will remain loyal only to those organizations that earn their loyalty consistently and continuously.

As part of the *management function* within an organization, public relations counsels organizational leaders. It brings to the decision-making table *theories* born of ongoing *research* and both original and existing *data* to drive decisions through *strategic planning*. It seeks to develop systematic and sustained programs to address issues in common with its various publics.

Much of the theoretical base is drawn from *social psychology*. Theories useful to public relations include *cognitive dissonance* and related *consistency theories* (how people deal with information contrary to existing information, attitudes and biases), *diffusion of innovations* (how information is transmitted from groups to individuals), *selectivity* (what people pay attention to and remember), as well as many theories associated with persuasion and conflict resolution.

Public relations maintains an *ongoing dialogue* with the organization's various publics. Such dialogue seeks to represent one to the other and to nurture an environment in which each can influence the other. This involves *listening*, not only hearing but also understanding another perspective. In this *boundary-spanning capacity*, public relations can assist the organization in *adapting* its products, services and ideas toward the interests of its publics. Within an organization, effective communication involves *cooperation* between public relations and other organizational functions such as marketing, legal, human resources, quality control and fundraising. Just as each knight was an equal participant at the round table in King Arthur's court, so too should each discipline have an effective and equal voice around the boardroom table.

The consumer philosophy has taken hold of all aspects of society, and organizations must answer with a *customer-driven response*, focusing on *benefits* for their publics. People support organizations that serve their interests and needs.

Mergers, downsizing and restructuring have led both businesses and nonprofits to seek ways to operate with *lean resources*, and the duplication that exists when marketing is isolated from public relations is too great a price for organizations to pay.

Strategic communication is part of an organization's *management* role and decision-making process. It is rooted in the organization's mission as lived out through its bottom line. This bottom line goes beyond money earned or raised; it focuses on the organization's fundamental purpose or mission. Strategists plot courses, set objectives and measure results.

Many *media changes* are affecting the way organizations communicate. The "mass media" have fragmented to the point that none rules supreme anymore. Lines have blurred between news, opinion and entertainment, further confusing audiences. Meanwhile, increasing advertising costs and tighter promotional budgets have led organizations to look at the more cost-effective communication and promotional tools from the public relations side of the house.

Strategic communication uses *multiple tools*, drawing from all communication-related disciplines to talk with various groups of people. *Established media* such as newspapers and television remain useful. *Emerging technologies*—particularly those involving digital, interactive and portable media—make it easier to supplement general media with more personal and targeted communication vehicles.

The strategy of choice in a competitive environment is *proactive*, *two-way communication*, in which organizations plan for, and initiate, relationships with the people important to their success. This approach emphasizes *dialogue* over monologue.

Organizations are successful to the extent that they enjoy a strong *reputation*, which results from neither accident nor luck. Strategic planning can identify and evaluate an organization's visibility and reputation. No organization can afford to be a "best-kept secret" among a relatively small number of supporters.

All kinds of organizations are realizing more keenly the need for long-term, mutually beneficial *relationships* between the organization and its various publics and market segments. Public relations practitioners long have recognized this, and marketing more recently has been discussing the need for *relationship marketing*, which really is a form of public relations.

With this growing awareness comes the fact that public relations is one of the fastest-growing professions and one of the most competitive. Universities find that the number of students wishing to study public relations often exceeds their ability to hire enough faculty to keep pace with the enrollment trend. Employers report receiving hundreds of viable applications for a single job opening.

All of this signals a healthy future for public relations, and for people who are willing to develop their skills in communication and problem-solving making themselves competitive in the profession that knows few boundaries.

#### THE BENEFITS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

If a political candidate with limitless funding from unidentified supporters blasts opponents without regard for truth, that's a problem for democracy. When a corporation hides mismanagement of financial, quality and safety issues, that's a problem for society. The fault lies not in public relations but rather in the corruption of public relations strategies and techniques by powers more interested in expediency than in ethical service to society.

Just as corporations and politicians can misuse public relations tools, these same tools are used for good by social reformers and advocates for the environment, social justice, minority rights, education and so many other issues of importance to nonprofit organizations, small businesses, local government and other groups.

Here are some of the ways that public relations helps society at large, as well as the organizations and people within society.

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- *Financial Well Being.* Companies and nonprofit organizations can save money with programs that retain customers, increase productivity and influence legislation. They can make money by generating new customers and by attracting interest in new products and services, as well as by enhancing the support of stockholders and donors.
- *Safety*. Public relations can save lives through programs advocating behaviors related to seatbelt use, bicycle helmets, organ donation, child abduction and many other causes.
- *Health.* Public relations can lead to healthy lifestyles with advocacy and education programs such as those that encourage people to control obesity, eat more nutritious meals, exercise regularly and check for early signs of disease.
- *Recreation*. Public relations within the sports and entertainment worlds can help people enjoy their leisure time. Sports teams, entertainers, recreational facilities and travel destinations use public relations to publicize events, promote offerings and engage fans. Every leisure activity from bird watching to football, gaming to painting engages in public relations.
- *Civic Awareness.* Military units use public relations to recruit, foster public support and report their progress to members, families and legislators. Government agencies and lawmakers promote programs and services to their constituents.
- *Community Service.* Nonprofit organizations such as schools, churches and charities promote their services and share their expertise. Hospitals and medical organizations promote health literacy and thus help people make healthy choices.
- *Reputation.* Public relations helps organizations to gain support and minimize opposition by generating favorable publicity, encouraging alliances and coalitions with other groups, and testing plans against the interests of the organization's publics.
- *Survival.* Public relations helps organizations weather crises, survive lawsuits and reverse negative opinions.

#### THE PUBLICS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

When public relations people talk about the organizations and the people they engage, they sometimes use the language of systems theory, which provides a framework. **Systems theory** provides a

framework for understanding how organizations interact, both internally and externally.

The concept of open or closed systems indicates the extent to which an organization interacts with its environment. **Open systems** interact frequently and easily; **closed systems**, not so much. Public relations generally operates best with open systems; that is, with organizations that are ready, willing and able to engage their many publics.

Systems theory offers the idea of **linkages**, patterns in which an organization interacts with its various publics. Every public can fit into one of four linkage patterns: customers who use the product or service, producers who make it, enablers who create supportive conditions and limiters who create negative conditions.

So who are these publics of public relations? Let's take a university as an example.

Among the **customer publics**, students and potential students are obviously important as **primary customers**. But we don't stop there. A grouping of **secondary customers** includes the graduate schools that eventually will receive applications from graduates of our university and businesses that eventually will hire the graduates.

Among **producer publics**, the university's employees are obvious matches. But these can be subdivided: faculty and staff, veteran and novice employees, tenured and non-tenured faculty, full-time and adjunct instructors, volunteer members of university boards and councils, and so on. Take it a step further and include book suppliers. Then add an important component of people and groups that help the university produce its "product" (i.e., education): alumni, donors, foundations, state and federal grants, perhaps state legislators in the case of public universities, and others who provide the financial base.

**Enabler publics** offer wide possibilities for potential interaction, because they provide support and foster a positive environment. For the university this category includes parents and career counselors who help students make academic choices. It includes regulators such as state education departments, educational oversight agencies and accrediting organizations—groups that can create a positive academic environment.

Community colleges that serve as feeder programs for transfer students and other universities that function as colleagues are also enabler publics. This category includes elements of the surrounding community: neighbors, local government, police agencies. Also counted among enablers are quality-of-life venues such as restaurants, bookstores and entertainment sites, and landlords providing off-campus housing.

Two other groups can serve as enablers when the relationship is positive with the university: the media that can extend the university's message to other publics, and unions that can influence employees.

**Limiter publics**, on the other hand, are groups that may negatively impact the university. Media and unions potentially fit into this category if the university cannot nurture them as enablers. Other limiters could be activists who are potentially critical of the university's role in issues such as environment, animal testing, minority rights and dozens of other topics that confront modern higher education. Limiters also include competitor educational institutions seeking to attract the same students. Limiters also can be threatening environmental factors, such as high interest rates on student loans or demographic factors such as fewer people of high school and college age, as population trends sometimes reveal.

Each of these groups is in a relationship not only with the university but also with each other and with additional groups unrelated to the university. Thus each is a player on the public relations stage.

#### HOW ORGANIZATIONS USE PUBLIC RELATIONS

What type of organizations use public relations? All kinds. Every kind. It's hard to think of any organization that doesn't engage in public relations in some way. Some practitioners work for departments within corporations or nonprofit organizations. Others work for public relations agencies that are hired by corporations or nonprofits to handle particular public relations needs.

In either setting—in-house or agency—the work generally falls into one of several categories. Here's a look at some of these, along with related case studies.

Corporate public relations provides the vehicle for businesses to publicize products, gain customers, motivate productivity and

workplace safety, and maintain a communication link with investors, regulators and industry colleagues.

Public relations is an everyday aspect of business in most corporations—the automobile, pharmaceutical and fashion industries; small businesses such as garden centers and corner cafes; service providers from hospitals to hair salons; and leisure entities such as sports teams, resorts and travel agencies. Even newspapers and television stations, as well as public relations agencies, have their own public relations people to engage their customers, attract new business, and promote their role within the community.

Most corporate public relations people today are engaged in a new trend within their profession toward **integrated strategic communication**. This is an evolution that blends public relations with marketing. It allows companies to coordinate their promotional activities and use every tool possible to engage and communicate with their customers and other significant publics.

Practitioners who work in corporate public relations are committed to helping their businesses or client companies. They also are committed to the ethical ideals of the public relations profession, and pragmatic enough to understand that the ethical practice of public relations is, in the long run, also in the best interests of their company. They have observed that corporations that hide behind pseudo public relations to deceive customers, or mask corporate wrong doing, inevitably find themselves in the public spotlight.

Consider some well-publicized instances of corporate misconduct: Halliburton overcharging government contracts, Compass Group bribing UN officials, Enron hiding debts, Tyco evading taxes, Olympus hiding financial losses, NewsCorp hacking phone records, and dozens of other scandals involving corruption, bribery, tax evasion, illegal political contributions, sex scandals and environmental offenses. Usually, the stonewalling and attempted (and always unsuccessful) cover-up is the greater crime, at least in the court of public opinion.

Thus for both ethical and pragmatic reasons, public relations practitioners often find themselves as the corporate conscience and voice of reason, urging companies to operate with transparency, integrity and accountability.

#### EARTH MONTH

With about 4 million customers each day in 16,000 locations around the world, Starbucks easily can be called an industry leader. Thus when it recognized its own vulnerability and turned its attention to an environment problem, the potential impact was huge.

Starbucks research showed that the environment is the top social concern to its customers internationally and that customers in general are more supportive of companies that practice good environmental policies. It also recognized an opportunity, because Starbucks itself was damaging the environment by using millions of disposable drinking cups every day.

Recognizing a silver living by correcting its own problem, Starbucks turned to its public relations people. They created "Earth Month," a diversified campaign among employees and customers to encourage the use of reusable mugs. They obtained the endorsement of celebrities and environmental organizations, and engaged reporters and bloggers.

The public relations strategy began with in-store promotion with free coffee for customers with reusable mugs was launched in the US and Canada, Europe, Latin America and Asia-Pacific venues. The company produced a global responsibility report highlighting Starbucks' commitment to environmental issues. Starbucks also convened meetings of suppliers, manufacturers, academics, even competitors to work toward common acceptance of reusable cups.

The program was successful, with 1.2 million customers participating in the opening promotion and 50,000 pledging to always use reusable mugs.

The public relations plan generated much favorable publicity for both Starbucks and the recycling cause—more than 265 local broadcast stories and 20 national reports, with 12 national print stories in the US alone. The program also increased positive consumer attitudes from 57 percent to 80 percent for Starbucks' environment responsibility.

In retrospect, Starbucks said it should have used social media more, something it added to its ongoing promotion of reusable cups.