

REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

WHO NEEDS AN IMAGE?

A RENOWNED PR COUNSELOR TOUTS ONE-ON-ONE RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AS THE ONLY ROAD TO LASTING CUSTOMER LOYALTY AND SUPPORT.

By Pat Jackson

Most people have a really hard time distinguishing between image and reputation. I don't even want an image for the organizations I represent. Why? An image, remember, is false.

Reputation is real. It's based on experience. Once I have experience with an organization and its services, any image I may have had is immediately driven out anyway. Image is this false thing that we build up, and it backfires if we can't deliver.

In the case of vocational-technical education, the danger is really there. Because two-thirds of school-system owners—the voters, who are the true customers of the school systems, are empty nesters or nonparticipants who have no direct connection with schools. Even fewer have a direct connection to votech. So a huge majority of people who own your institution have no link to you whatsoever.

You have to communicate a true reputation that they will trust enough to give you the support you need. People do not give support based on image. But if they have some interaction, if they know someone who says, "Well, *my* son went ... or *my* daughter did ... or *I* did ...," now you're talking.

I'll give you an example. The community college system in Phoenix, Arizona, has strategically, over 25 years, tailored offerings so it could continually reach those people in Maricopa County who are outside its network. They have taken courses into shop-

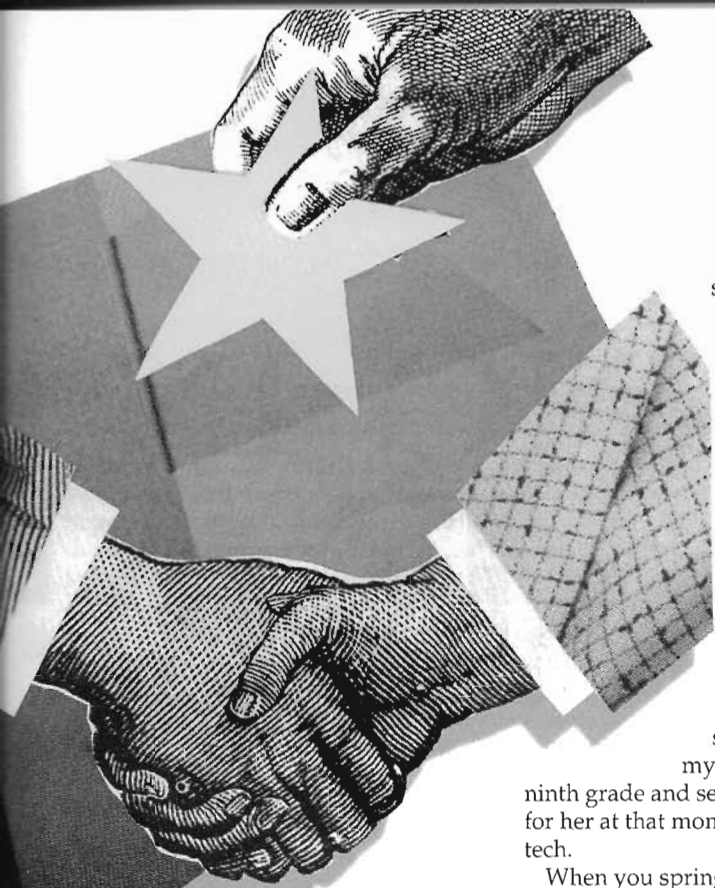
ping malls, they have done everything they can do so that voters have exposure to the offerings of the community college. Remember, Phoenix is a town that disappears every five years—20 percent of the population turns over every year. Despite that, 68 percent of the voters have had some direct contact with the Maricopa Community College system. It is interesting that its bond issues always pass. They have truly built a reputation with people by serving them.

There are three ways to approach reputation management:

- **Proactive:** You set out to build and keep the reputation of your organization.
- **Defensive:** Your reputation is under some kind of attack, and you need to counter it.
- **Maintenance:** You have a good reputation, and you just want to keep that going.

Let's talk about the proactive approach here—something that can put you in charge of driving public opinion of your school or program.

Being proactive means going out and finding support—not just the people who sort of "feel good" about education, I mean people who are willing to get up out of their chairs and give you true, behavioral support when you need it. These are not only the business people who donate equipment and come to you to discuss curriculum but also the person who would go over to the church supper and be willing to



stand up for the school. When Charlie starts talking about how local taxes should be cut, starting with elimination of the vo-tech [school], our guy is the person who says, "You know, Charlie, I certainly understand your point of view. But here are some data" or some kind of experience he can relate to show why the vo-tech school is important to the community.

How do you motivate that kind of behavior?

You begin with awareness. There's still room for a little of that media work we all are so fond of doing, but don't waste too much time on that. The paper can run 52 good stories and it doesn't mean a thing unless the readers already thought you were pretty good. It's called selective perception—we evaluate new information based on what we already believe.

But 98 percent of us won't do anything about 96 percent of the subjects we deal with just based on information. We need more.

After awareness, our minds move to a state of "latent readiness." If you can design a message that keeps a concept in someone's mind for 30 seconds or more, their brain automatically opens a file on that subject. It's totally subconscious. When a person's brain opens a file on vo-tech, that person will be deciding whether she wishes to behave positively, negatively or do nothing.

What really spurs behavior is a "triggering event." Take the voter who under-

stands there is a vo-tech system. He's heard some good things and some bad things, but on balance he feels pretty good about it. The trigger is a bond issue, or maybe a bad accident in one of the labs. Or maybe a secretary runs off with the principal, so it becomes a scandal. Or maybe it's my daughter entering

ninth grade and seeing that the best thing for her at that moment is to move into vo-tech.

When you spring a triggering event, such as an open-house for the parents of ninth-graders, you assemble a lot of people known as a captive audience. Now you're dealing with people who are right for you, not Joe Sixpack.

In the 1980s, every hospital was buying ads. What a waste of time. Instead, what are they doing now? Scheduling classes: Come and learn about osteoporosis or psychological counseling for mothers of teens. They are building relationships, which offers a better chance of moving people toward changing their behaviors.

Is this behavioral model important? You bet it is. All the brochures, all the media, even the word of mouth that has no basis in any relationship is so fragile it could go away in a minute.

Take my AT&T client as an example. Is there anyone here who's eager to see some more TV commercials about long distance services? Would you like some more telemarketing calls? How about some more direct mail? See the problem? Mass marketing doesn't work.

So how is AT&T going to survive? We are putting together the largest ambassador program in history. Every AT&T employee—about 120,000 of them—will be trained to communicate the company's message. All the vendors and suppliers to AT&T—guess what? Their employees will be encouraged to be ambassadors, and so will AT&T retirees. Pretty soon you've got a million people doing one-on-one relationship marketing.


According to AT&T research, 70 percent of the reason people say they like a product or service has almost everything to do

with the way they are treated by the organization. There's a whole bunch of school administrators out there who think that if they just get the test scores up, everything will be super. Let me tell you, nobody will know or give a rap. I guarantee you that the people who want to de-fund the schools will say, "Well, they only went up 2 percent, or they only went up 10 percent."

People have one question about every organization, and only one: Can I trust the people who make up the organization?

The first thing to do is make sure you have the right person talking about your school at the right moment. The superintendent is the one to talk when you are in deep trouble, or when you have a blockbuster announcement to make. The chief operating officers (the principals or other senior people) and the rest of the school family should be talking about program details. But don't forget the other members of the community who can be ambassadors for your school or program:

- Parents of students. Encourage them to get the word out.
- Vendors and suppliers. Too often we just treat them like, you know, "bring in the pencils and then get your truck out of the drive." What we really should be doing is saying, "Hi, Judy, have you got a minute? I want to show you the latest thing we've got. It's a state-of-the-art broadcast facility." Judy needs something to chat about when she's delivering all that stuff.
- The community around the school, which we might also think of as the business community. If they're out there saying good things, we don't need to say anything.
- Opinion leaders in the community, who guide voters' actions.

Our job is to get these people in synch and speaking with one clear voice on the key subjects. They are the third-party advocates who build your reputation. I'll believe somebody I have confidence in who says this is a program that really pays off—even if I have no direct stake in it. By comparison, I can read the same thing in the local Bugle, or read 64 brochures, and it doesn't mean anything. 

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