



DECA as a Public Relations Tool for Your Program

DECA as a Public Relations Tool

What is Public Relations

Public relations is the business of communicating positive messages about an individual or group to other groups (“target publics”). This section of the handbook will provide considerations for achieving this goal for your local DECA chapter.

Identifying the PR Client

The first step in the PR process is to identify and evaluate the individual, group, activity, or idea you want to promote. It is very important to know exactly who or what you are trying to promote. The focus of your promotional efforts is known as the **PR Client**. Specifying and evaluating the PR client will make your PR program much more effective and help set PR goals and messages. Four basic PR client categories are *individuals, groups, activities, and ideas*.

Occasionally, one individual is the focus of the public relations activities. An example would be an individual candidate seeking the support of the voting delegates for a local, state, or national DECA office. In other cases, an individual is chosen and promoted to represent a group, an activity, or an idea. When this happens, the real “client” is not the individual, but what the individual is representing.

The most common PR client is a group. In Marketing and Cooperative Education, the group might be all the students in the program; it might be only the students involved in the internship portion of the program (slightly different); or it might be those individuals who are in your DECA chapter possibly different from the first group).

Consider other groups that could be served as clients of PR efforts: the Career Education programs, teachers, guidance counselors, parents, administrators, business and industry, civic groups, the school, etc.

The second most common client is an activity or group of related activities. It is an acceptable PR practice to invent an activity in order to generate favorable publicity. Invented PR activities can range from very simple bake sales or more complex campaigns that may last for months. When fundraising is the focus of the activity, it is important to determine if the activity or the group receiving the funds is the client. It is always easier to promote one specific client, rather than two or more. When the activity itself is the client, you promote that activity. When activities are planned as part of a program promoting the individual, a group, or an idea, you promote the activity differently.

The most difficult client to work with is the idea. Promoting free enterprise is an example of the “idea as client” in PR. A voter registration drive, SADD campaign, and “Just Say No” project are examples. A person or a group is tangible -- you can see it, talk to it -- it has an existence in the world of our five senses. An idea is an abstract thing -- it exists in our minds, and is harder for others to grasp. Because you are faced with the added problem of making the idea “come alive” in the mind of your target publics, you must turn the abstract into the concrete. This requires creativity and imagination!

Evaluating the PR Client

Once you have identified your PR client, you should evaluate the client from a PR standpoint. It is helpful to generate a list of at least a dozen positive statements about the client. If you are familiar with the client, a simple brainstorming session might produce a useful list. For areas that are less familiar, it would be important to interview appropriate individuals and investigate the topic prior to generating your list.

In addition to identifying positive statements about your client, it is important to uncover any negative attitudes that publics have about your client. Should any of these exist, it is important to address them in your PR plans.

There are numerous examples in marketing of campaigns that have been disastrous because negative perceptions were not addressed (i.e. the Ford Edsel, cake mixes).

Identifying and evaluating your client is the first step in planning an effective PR program. Once you have narrowed your focus to one individual, group, activity, or idea, and have begun the job of creating the messages that will promote your client, you are ready to advance to the second step. This is to determine your **target publics** -- those to whom you want to deliver your messages.

Identifying and Evaluating Target Publics

Most ineffective PR programs result from not understanding the concept of the target public. Limited financial and human resources are wasted if you are not delivering your message to the right people.

In identifying your target publics, determine whose opinion of your client matters. Most target publics fall into four broad categories: *individuals, small groups, large groups, and everyone*.

In some cases, the opinions of one person are important. That one person might be the principal, superintendent, mayor, key business leader, or congressional representative. A PR program with just one person as the target public is relatively easy to plan and implement.

The opinion of one or more small groups (approximately 30 individuals) is more typical. Examples are your local school board, town council, or DECA chapter. It is always important to consider developing positive attitudes among your own DECA membership. When your members see proof of their own value, they tend to feel better about themselves and their efforts, and work harder to achieve their goals.

Large groups are most often the key target public for a PR program. Typical large groups might include the sophomore class of your high school, all the students in your high school, all members of your local Chamber of Commerce, etc.

In rare instances, your PR client may be concerned about the opinions of everybody. For example, campaigns for health concerns may be targeted to everyone. However, PR is always more effective when the target publics are smaller and well-defined. Remember, even if *everyone* is your target public, the same message is not always effective for everybody.

In creating the PR program for your client, brainstorm potential target publics in the categories of individuals, small groups, and large groups. You will not finalize this list until you have set your PR goals, picked your messages, and selected your media. However, you can start eliminating ideas that are obviously not realistic. Second, ask yourself how important the opinions of each of the remaining groups are to the client. Break the list down into three sub-categories: PRIMARY (those whose opinions are very important to the client); SECONDARY (those whose opinions are important but not crucial to the client); and OTHER (those whose opinions do not really matter much to the client at all). You will continue to adjust this list throughout the course of the PR process.

Selecting PR Messages, Goals, and Objectives

The ultimate goal of public relations is to create favorable action on the part of target publics toward the PR client. This goal is reached by transmitting favorable messages through appropriate media to the target publics. You cannot set your PR goals until you decide what your messages will be. PR objectives must be set after you determine both your messages and your goals.

In order to be effective, a PR program has one main message and some supporting messages. Following are examples of main messages for the four types of PR clients:

- Individual: “Elect Nancy Thompson for DECA President”
- Group: “Be on the Leading Edge: Join DECA”

- Activity: “Come to the Fantastic Festival of Lights on the Lake”
- Idea: “Be a Point of Light – Volunteer”

Supporting PR messages act to emphasize the main message. These can be either direct or indirect; they can also be information messages or action messages. Direct PR messages tell the target public exactly what you want them to think. For example, “Nancy Thompson is the best candidate for DECA President.” Direct PR messages often look very much like your main message. Indirect PR messages allow the target public to draw its own conclusion. Instead of telling them what to think, you give them proof and let them draw their own conclusions. For example, “Nancy Thompson: Proven leadership track record and highest chapter producer” is an indirect message.

Most PR professionals prefer indirect messages because they know that target publics are more likely to accept conclusions they draw for themselves, rather than conclusions you spell out for them. You must consider the specific main message to be sent if you are to develop an effective indirect message.

Messages can be informational or action oriented. Information messages are based on the idea that if the public knows good things about your client, they will be likely to hold a favorable opinion of the client. The action message is based on the goal of getting people to do something. The most effective PR programs use simple messages. The simpler the message, the easier it is to communicate, repeat, and remember.

Establishing the PR Goals

Once you have identified your target public and determined what they know about your client (both positives and negatives), you are ready to set your PR goals. The three basic PR goals follow:

1. To create favorable opinion (and perhaps action) in the minds of target publics where no opinion currently exists.
2. To maintain favorable opinion (and perhaps action) in the minds of target publics where favorable opinions now exist.
3. To change unfavorable opinions which now exist in the minds of target publics to favorable opinion (and perhaps action).

To determine which of the above goals you should select, ask representatives of your target publics a few questions based on your PR messages. This is an essential step in the PR process, and it can be done either formally or informally. Remember, never assume that you know what opinion your target public holds of the client. A formal inquiry could be based on a questionnaire administered to a small sample of each target public, either in person or on the telephone. An informal inquiry could involve a series of questions asked in an informal interview.

If your inquiry reveals that your target publics do not know much about your client, you would select “creating favorable opinion” as your goal. Creating public opinion involves using a lot of informational messages, different media, and repetition. It is not the most difficult of the three goals to accomplish, but it usually takes the most work.

If you find that your target public already hold a positive opinion of your client, then you would select “maintaining favorable opinion” as your goal. This is the easiest of the three goals to attain and can be accomplished by sending positive messages through whatever media created the favorable opinions in the first place.

When faced with changing public opinion, it is important to discover **why** they feel that way before you try to develop a PR program to change the opinions.

Interviews with selected members of the target public should reveal this. Negative opinions about a client exist for two main reasons:

1. There is something really wrong with the client or what the client does, and the target public knows it.
2. There is nothing wrong with the client or what the client does, but the target public believes there is something wrong.

If there is something wrong with the client, the only legitimate thing to do is get the client to change it, and then use the PR program to “educate” the target public about the change. If there is nothing wrong with the client, the PR program should rely heavily on indirect information messages about the client’s redeeming features, delivered as many different ways as possible. Third party endorsements and publicity are useful techniques. Changing negative opinions is the toughest of the three goals to accomplish and requires the most creative approach.

Prior to establishing objectives, you should determine whether the focus of the strategy will be an active PR program or a passive PR program. In a passive approach, examine what the client does routinely, select those activities which you deem worthy of public notice, and build your PR messages and objectives around these routine activities. Often, clients are not even aware of their good deeds, and it takes “PR thinking” to identify and promote the good things they already do. An active PR program requires you do the same analysis as above, but you also create new events and activities. The sole purpose of this is to create new PR opportunities. If this is done well, it can add a great deal of fun and excitement to your PR program.

Setting the PR Objectives

A goal is a general statement of what you want to accomplish. An objective is a specific statement of what you will accomplish. Effective people and PR programs create objectives that enable them to reach their goal.

Useful objectives always include three elements: they identify who will do the work, what the work is, and what the deadline will be. A PR objective should also include the target public to be involved.

Objectives can refer to *means* or to *ends*. A means objective describes a method you plan to use to create, maintain, or change the attitudes of a target public. An ends objective describes the changed attitude. When action is desired, an ends objective describes the action you want the target public to take.

- Means PR objective: The ticket committee (people involved) will distribute 500 “Come to the Job Fair” flyers (what the work is) to Central High School students (target public) by January 15 (deadline).
- Ends PR objective: The PR committee (people involved) will get at least 200 Central High School students (target public) to attend the Job Fair (what the work is) on January 22 (deadline).

In summary, the main steps you will engage in are:

1. Create your main PR message
2. Select your supporting PR messages
3. Find out your target publics’ opinions about your main message
4. Establish your PR goal (create, maintain, or change opinion)
5. Set your end PR objective or objectives
6. Set your means objectives to reach your end objectives

Selecting PR Media

After you have selected your target publics, and your message, you must decide how you want to convey these messages. A medium (media as plural) is a carrier of a message. Selecting the carriers for your messages is called “media selection.” Before selecting the media to use in your PR program, you must answer three basic questions about the media.

- Will the medium reach my target public?
- Will the medium carry my PR message effectively?
- Can we afford to use the medium?

The following is a list of the types of media which fit into the broad categories of news media, miscellaneous media, and direct media. For more specific information on each of these areas, consult an advertising or public relations text.

News Media: TV, Radio, Newspapers, Magazines

Miscellaneous Media: newsletters, posters, flyers, display windows, in-school announcements, etc.

Direct Media: individually addressed letters, speeches, group presentations, word-of-mouth campaigns, etc.

Planning the PR Program

There are several key steps that any PR campaign must take in order to make sure it is successful. Once you know what you want to accomplish, you must organize people to carry out the PR program, organize the time for carrying out the tasks, coordinate the PR program schedule, plan special PR events, and get permission.

Organize People

Your organization chart can be developed using the objectives you created, as long as you included the people specific portion of the objective! You should identify a Program Chairperson to be responsible for the overall success of the program. Most of the work uses either volunteers or appointees — just be sure the individual is committed to the PR project. If you are planning an active PR program, you will need one or more committees to run the PR events you create, in addition to the committees who are actually publicizing the events. Be sure that you have adequate resources (people, time, funds) to actually do a good job at meeting your objectives. If you are overly ambitious, you may have a negative outcome rather than a positive one.

Organize Time

Some PR programs can be planned, implemented, and evaluated in a month. Others are an ongoing process. Realistically, it is a good idea to set a limit to your activities so that you can see the end result and gain satisfaction from your efforts. Because each of your objectives is time specific (with a deadline), you can create a schedule or calendar which sequences the activities in which you will be involved. Some people like to plan “backwards” from the objective by breaking it down into the smaller steps that must happen in order to accomplish it.

Coordinating the PR Program Schedule

The PR Program Chairperson is responsible for keeping committees and individuals on schedule as they seek to achieve their assigned objectives. Three specific practices will help the chairperson fulfill this responsibility.

1. Post the schedule, objectives, deadlines, and assignments in a prominent place in your classroom, so everyone can see who is expected to do what by when.
2. Meet with the committee chairpersons on a regular basis and ask them to report on their own progress. Keep all members of the group informed about how things are going.

3. Be flexible - the best plans may need to be changed. The best people can miss a deadline. The chairperson must be flexible when things do not work out as planned. Be ready to reschedule, reassign, or even drop an objective or two.

Planning Special PR Events

Special PR events have to fit the client - is it consistent with the image you want to convey? The success of a PR event often depends on the number of people who attend.

When that is the case, schedule your PR activities so that they are close to the event itself. This creates maximum excitement and top-of-the-mind awareness. For example, if you are planning a fashion show, you could start your PR activities one month prior to the event. Activities could include a newspaper announcement in the first week, a follow-up story and some posters the second week, and another press release, public service announcements, new posters and flyers the third week. In order to create fresh and exciting special events, get ideas through brainstorming. If your group is not enthusiastic about an idea, don't do it. A special event that is supported by only a limited number of people is destined for failure.

Getting Permission

Whatever PR activities are planned, you must clear them with your client. This is especially true when you plan special PR events. Be sure your client approves of your idea before you invest a lot of work. Most schools have policies governing press releases and other things you would plan to do in a PR program. Even though your client may be outside the school system altogether, you still represent your school. Be sure you comply with all school policies, and have their permission to do what you plan to do.

Evaluating the PR Program

In all areas of life, it is important that we learn from our experiences. When things go well, we should try to determine the elements that made for success.

When we have negative experiences, we should identify the factors that led to the situation so that we can avoid them in the future. In public relations activities, we should analyze the process we used to carry out the activity and decide how we could have done better and what we did to make things work well. If this important step is neglected, we truly have not completed the PR cycle. Evaluation can take place during the course of the PR program by answering these questions: Are our messages being sent? Are our messages being received? Are the opinions of our target publics changing in the direction we want them to change? The answers to these questions allow you to make alterations in your PR program before it is too late!