

THE PR PRINCIPLE

BY ROBERT W. FOSTER, P.E., P.L.S.

CONSIDER THE case of Fred Foresight, a registered professional surveyor in a medium-sized city. He employs two regular two-person field crews, a drafter/graphics specialist, a computer/drafter and a secretary/receptionist. His teenage son is working for him for the summer. By adding a combination of his son, his drafter/graphics person or his computer/drafter, he is able to field three two-person survey crews to meet short term demand.

Fred handles all initial client contact, negotiation with lawyers and planning officials, research, billing and collections. He considers himself to be totally responsible for marketing his company's services. But on a typical day in the life of Fred Foresight Surveying Services Inc., the following events occur:

Fred briefs his two crew chiefs on their day's assignments, gives instructions to his office staff, then leaves to perform several functions out of the office, including research at the registry of deeds, a meeting with his banker and a conference with a client regarding a proposed commercial development project. Fred will be out of the office all day but gives his secretary/receptionist no details.

One of Fred's survey crews is sent to an industrial site where they are to re-establish a property line. It turns out that the line goes through the corner of a warehouse. The crew chief returns to the truck to check his work. While the second member of the crew is standing by the instrument, a stranger approaches and asks what is going on. The surveyor/technician explains that they have just re-established a property line and "it chops off the corner of this warehouse; somebody sure screwed up!" What he doesn't realize is that this "stranger" is his boss's client and is also the owner of the warehouse. Further, Fred Foresight performed the construction staking for the warehouse when it was built ten years earlier.

That morning a phone call comes into Fred's office. The caller is a prospective client who wants to talk to Fred

about a 40-acre survey. The secretary/receptionist says she doesn't know where Fred is or when he'll return. She neglects to ask for a number where the caller may be reached.

Five minutes later there is another phone call from a client asking for a progress report on his plan, due for a closing in two days. The secretary/receptionist isn't familiar with the project and calls the drafter/graphics (DG) specialist to the phone. The DG, who is overloaded with work and has no help today since the other drafter is in the field, knows that the client's project is way behind schedule. In his frustration the DG offers the explanation that the file on that project has been lost and he cannot tell the client when the plan will be done.

Fred's teenage son can only work in the morning on this day since he must spend most of the afternoon with his orthodontist. To keep him busy, the secretary/receptionist (in her de facto position as office manager) sends him across town to deliver a set of plans to a law office. Sonny arrives at the plush law offices of Tanner, Turner & Tort with his shirt unbuttoned to his navel and with his trendy high top sneakers untied. As he hands the roll of plans (not wrapped, no cover letter) to the attractive receptionist he makes a remark that he thinks is suave, cool and cute. To her it is fresh, rude and stupid.

These four incidents demonstrate that every one of Fred Foresight's employees' activities have public relations implications, for better or for worse. Every time an employee steps out of his home and comes in contact with people, he is relating a public image. The way he dresses, his manner of speaking, his personal conduct, all announce who he is. The same goes for his image as an employee. His behaviour reflects upon his employer and the firm. During company hours every employee becomes an ambassador of his working place.

An owner must be doubly aware of his own conduct, for he sets the mood for his company. If he gives little thought to how his company is coming across to

the public and his clients, then his employees will use that as a signal and will not care either. All it takes is one careless public appearance to leave a lasting and sometimes devastating impression.

The moral of the story is not that Fred should stay in his office all day, every day. He must go out to conduct business, meet with clients and do research at the registry of deeds. While away from his office he must rely upon his employees to make good impressions on the public when they meet them. For meet them they will, regularly and frequently.

Fred must recognize his vulnerability to the unintended public relations affects of his employees. Fred will hear about the unfortunate incident at the warehouse and the "lost file" explanation but he may never hear about the poor impression made at the law office by his teenage son, and he will never know about the 40-acre survey job he didn't get for lack of a return telephone number.

The PR Component

Building a strong public image begins with implementing a cohesive public relations strategy that communicates a business philosophy of competence and quality.

First of all, let's recognize that public relations is but one component of marketing, along with market analysis, advertising, sales and business development. Public relations implies public image and if a business has a poor public image, its whole marketing effort will be severely handicapped. So how does a business person - more specifically a sole proprietor, more specifically the surveyor/proprietor - conduct a public relations program?

Training

Fred should begin to train his people in some of the finer PR techniques. The first thing he should do is point out to them that they are all - without exception - involved in public relations. The unbuttoned shirt, the poor

telephone technique, the ingenuous excuse for blown deadlines and the careless talk to strangers at the site, all have a dangerous and damaging impact on Fred's public image. Sullied reputation, lost work, even litigation may be the result.

Fred may hire a consultant to perform market analysis for his business. He may hire a graphic designer to work on unifying the image projected by Fred Foresight Surveying Services Inc. in its printed materials. Fred may even formalize his sales efforts by creating a file of potential clients and by making regular follow-up calls on current and past clients. But will Fred involve all of his people in his public relations program? Will he adjust their attitudes by educating them to the importance of their own conduct and communications with the public and the clientèle? Assuming that all of Fred's employees have good intentions toward Fred and the business, he could, with a little effort, convert them to PR people with a positive impact.

Some Principles

A few principles are in order here. Fred's employees should never be put in a position where they must cover up for him. He should let his secretary/receptionist know where he is going and when he will return.

No one with telephone answering responsibilities should be put in a position of having to lie for an employer. The tell-him-I'm-out syndrome is bad for PR, bad for sales and bad for employee morale. It also establishes a style for the whole company in dealing with clients. It encourages employees to make excuses for all kinds of deficiencies in their own performance - even to their employer!

Another principle deals with assigning responsibilities. When a project is in schedule trouble, it should be clearly understood who is to communicate that fact to the client. Good client relations (a vital component of public relations) requires good client communications. If the job is in trouble and cannot be delivered on time, there is no refuge in procrastination. Tell the client sooner rather than later.

In the field, only one person should be in charge, and only one person should discuss any aspect of the project with the client or with curious passers-by. Gratuitous statements should not be made (e.g. "somebody sure screwed up"). The spokesperson should clearly understand who he is talking to: Client? Adjoining property owner? Newspaper reporter? Busybody? Further, a client

can be quickly annoyed and frustrated when discussing the project with the survey crew when everybody tries to talk at once. If the crew chief and the instrument person are both trying to explain the intricacies of surveying to the client, it appears that no one is in charge. That's a bad message to the client who may be paying a hundred dollars an hour for their services.

Though beauty is only skin deep, appearances can leave lasting impressions. Enough has been written about the way surveyors dress on the job without it having to be repeated here. But surveying can be a tough, hot, sweaty, sometimes dirty job. It takes extra care and sensitivity on the part of a survey crew who has worked eight hours on a dusty construction site on a hot summer day, to maintain a neat appearance when they stop for some refreshment on the way back to the office. The same is true for the company clerk who delivers plans to the offices of clients. They all carry the banner for their boss, advertising his style to the whole world.

Attitude Adjustment

Reference has been made here to attitude adjustment. It's a chain reaction. The public forms strong impressions from the attitudes of people offering services. The attitude which a survey crew has toward its work and appearance may be a direct reflection of the signals that their boss is sending out to the world.

Surveyors working in the field should see themselves and talk about themselves as providing a professional service. They are not labourers. They are people involved in a highly technical service which demands particular expertise shared by no other profession. Road signs should not say "Men Working in Road". They should say "Land Surveyors Ahead".

The same principle applies to the survey vehicle. Dragging tail pipes and flopping fenders are a poor image to project to the public. But the sign on the door of the truck is important, too. Some survey vehicles look more like Good Humour wagons than vehicles from which a professional service is to be delivered. A plastic magnetic sign hanging on the door suggest impermanence. Worse yet is the hand-lettered cardboard sign stuck in the window of a carry-all.

One of the tangible work products of the land surveyor's service is the monument he sets at a property corner. The form and appearance of the surveyor's work product carry important PR connotations. Which is more impressive to the public as a sign of a professional

service: an iron pipe driven into the ground at the property corner, knurled over like the tops of an old pair of boots, or a marker with a neat cap that reports the registration number of the professional responsible for its placement? The appearance of the employer's work product may indeed have a direct impact on the employees' attitudes toward their work.

Conclusion

Public relations awareness is not just for the proprietor who is starting out in business. Nor is public relations something we start doing when we decide that it is important. Public relations is something we are all doing all of the time, whether we recognize that fact or not. All employees of the surveyor in private practice are part of that proprietor's ongoing public relations campaign. The path to a healthy and successful business starts with involving everybody in a conscious effort to develop and maintain solid PR attitudes and habits.

Good public relations is everybody's business.

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