

D5000 District Leadership Academy 2008-2009
Final Essay
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Rotary Public Relations in District 5000

Rotary International has been struggling with appropriate Public Relations for several years now. At one point, it was not encouraged for Rotary to “brag” or “toot its own horn” about its accomplishments. It was only recently in Rotary history that RI, Districts and Clubs began promoting the good work of Rotary.

Ask most average citizens on the street, “What is Rotary?” or “Do you know a Rotarian?” or maybe even, “Have you heard of Rotary?” and in most cases, the person will not have heard of Rotary or will not have a clear picture of who we are. I have asked teachers at the local elementary school where we donate books, give a Teacher of the Year Award, and even use our District Simplified Grants to support them, and even they don’t know a lot about Rotary. They have heard of Rotary, but don’t have a clear picture.

RI has helped by providing consistent and frequently updated tools like the “Humanity in Motion” series as well as Public Relations grants to assist Districts and Clubs in funding the effort to reach out to the community and share what Rotarians are accomplishing throughout the world. Some Districts, such as District 5000, have taken advantage and applied for and received these grants.

The new Club Leadership Plan has elevated Public Relations, and there is now a Director position on the Board for PR, instead of having it as part of Club Service. This shows the shift in viewpoint of the importance of Public Relations in the Club.

We have seen growth in Rotary in emerging countries, where visible humanitarian programs are thriving, thanks to Matching Grant assistance from developed countries. These high profile global projects attract attention of prospective Rotarians in the communities served. Meanwhile, membership numbers in the United States, Canada and some Asian countries have been declining. Some argue the focus on overseas projects may not be as appealing to prospective members as homegrown projects in their own communities. Rotary International created District Simplified Grants to turn the focus on local community service. I believe that Rotary Clubs are doing remarkable work in their neighborhoods. The problem is...the public is unaware of Rotary’s Service Above Self here at home.

That is where an effective Public Relations campaign can really help, not only to improve the awareness of Rotary in our local communities, but to also help to improve our image, and ultimately, increase membership. People like to go where the action is and to be a part of something great. If we can show them how great Rotary is, they will join us, or at least participate by volunteering.

As media outlets look for ways to cut costs, a well written story and a photo or video footage may just be what they need to fill that gap. An organized effort at the club level will help get Rotary in the media more often. In order to achieve this increase in coverage, I suggest that the District provide training for the clubs at their level. A Public Relations seminar on each island would be one way to handle this. An overview of the District's Public Relations efforts as well as the efforts by Rotary International would be a great way to start. Also, include some examples of pieces that have run on local TV or radio or in print in the paper. The most important part is to assist those on the PR committees with "how to" training. What are the elements of a good PR committee? What makes a good story? How to create a news release? How to submit a story or news release to the local media?

I recall the tremendous impact from coverage of the Humanitarian Awards that were presented by the six Rotary Clubs on Kauai. I submitted a news release that was published in 2 local papers and had the opportunity to promote the nominations for the awards through an on air interview with a local radio station. This generated immediate phone calls with questions about the nomination process and led to several nominations by mail from non-Rotarians. Ultimately, we had a very successful event. A great story followed announcing all of our awardees with a photo that included our District Governor and Mayor with the honorees.

Having an event promoted before and after with a story in the local paper, or just having that photo with a caption published a couple days after a project or event brings awareness about Rotary and our local clubs to our community. The pre-project coverage attracts volunteers and lets people know what we are doing. The post project coverage lets people see how much fun we have providing service to our community and acts as further reminder of what Rotary is all about.

We need to take on Public Relations as an educational element and put as much effort into it as we do with other areas in Rotary. It is our opportunity to let people know who we are and what we accomplish. It is our duty to our Club and our District to help educate the community and improve awareness. As Past Rotary International President Cliff Dochterman noted, "It is not the media's responsibility to raise awareness, it is ours." Each Rotarian should have a 10-20 second answer to the question, "What is Rotary?" They should all be aware of the projects and programs of their club.

Each club should have a Public Relations Director that has been trained, and is comfortable writing a news release and submitting it to the local media. This PR Director should work with his/her committee on determining what they will submit to see if they can have something on a regular basis, once a month or once every other month. They can coordinate with the other clubs in the area so as not to bombard the media.

With training, we will know when a project is newsworthy, when to submit a story to the media, which projects are new, different or even have a great human interest angle and

how to prepare club spokespersons with attention grabbing sound bites. Proper training and good communication with the District PR chair will help in coordinating our efforts. Another good resource would be a speaker from the local media providing insight as to what they look for in a good story.

There are many great programs and projects in Rotary, and effective Public Relations should be an element in every one of them. That includes awareness building for our own club members and keeping our Family of Rotary informed and involved. If we can't educate and involve our own members, how can we expect the community to be aware?