NOTES AND COMMENTS

Some Thoughts on Public Relations

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"Public relations" is the process by which an organization or institution relates to any of the "publics" with which it deals. As open-ended as this may seem, in practice, the Church as an institution must deal only with a limited number of publics. The first, I would suggest, is the Church membership itself. Other important "publics" are 1) potential converts, 2) those who have no interest in becoming members but who interact with Church programs and 3) those who have no practical contact with the Church at all. Our job is complicated by the fact that our various publics are not self-contained; they overlap each other, and yet, paradoxically, persons in one public are often unaware of the attitudes of those in another.

I think the Church handles public relations with its own members quite well. Church magazines, conference addresses, personal visits by authorities, as well as local communications networks give the membership wide opportunity to communicate with the leadership and to participate in policy-making. We relate to potential converts, of course, through our proselyting activities. The other "publics" usually must be dealt with in a different way, and this is traditionally the purview of public relations. Because we church members like to think of everyone as a potential convert, however, developing and projecting a PR posture appropriate to all of these "publics" poses a real challenge to the Church. If we were like the Jews, who are not seeking converts, our problems would be fewer.

In facing these challenges, we should look briefly at our history in PR terms. In my opinion, Joseph Smith was a masterful public relations practitioner. He understood the importance of general public understanding of the Church and its goals, even if that understanding did not lead to an immediate harvest of converts. It is instructive to note that the Articles of Faith grew from a letter to an editor, clearly written to relate to the general public. The Prophet, probably without realizing it, was concerned with the Church's overall "positioning" more than with simply maintaining a good "image." I believe he was eager to separate the Church from the other frontier religions, to demonstrate that it offered a much wider scope of doctrine. By spelling out the wide range of beliefs covered in the Articles of Faith, he "positioned" the Church as something other than a fundamentalist sect following a single charismatic preacher. He had a firm doctrinal stance on all the questions of the day.

If we follow his activities in Nauvoo, we find this same general public relations approach. He made himself accessible to any visitor who wanted to interview him, and always discussed a wide range of topics. He let members and nonmembers alike know of his interest in ancient languages, city planning, education and other public issues. His candidacy for the President of the United States reinforced this stand. Joseph Smith wanted the world to know that Mormonism was not confining, that Mormons were capable of playing on a stage much larger

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than that built by the narrow creeds of frontier preachers.

I think Brigham Young had a good PR sense, too, although he positioned himself and the Church a little differently. Faced with intense anti-Mormon attitudes, he focused on the Church's accomplishments—conquering the West, settling new towns, and developing irrigation, and so on. While he granted interviews to traveling journalists, he was less available than Joseph Smith had been, thus projecting the image of a man of practical affairs, with pressing problems and not much time for useless conversation. I think the tradition of Mormons as *doers* comes in part from this posture.

After Brigham Young, we went through a period where the PR focus of the Church was somewhat confused, mainly because of the great struggle over polygamy and statehood. B. H. Roberts' *Comprehensive History* was a major PR effort, but it did not really relate to the general public, because of its intent, and survives only because of its interest for Church members. The virulence of anti-Mormon feelings within Utah shaped the PR attitude of all the Mormon leaders, many of whom literally went underground to avoid arrest. It was not until Heber J. Grant began consciously building bridges to Utah's non-Mormon community in a non-proselyting way that the Church began to see a significant change. President Grant recognized the tremendous potential of the mass media, and he led the Church into broadcasting, opening the way for Richard L. Evans and the Tabernacle Choir to project to the general public the soft-sell image of Mormons as "good people."

Of course, President David O. McKay, with his superb PR sense, also helped soften the feelings of the public throughout the world. I was with him in Glasgow, Scotland, during the Tabernacle Choir's first concert there in 1955. President McKay spoke at a press conference, and the Lord Provost (Mayor) responded in a manner so warm and cordial that President McKay said to me, "This is the greatest day in the history of the Church in Scotland." Having been a Scottish missionary himself, he knew first hand about the generally bad image the Church had endured there.

What moved President McKay so much was the Lord Provost's personal anecdote about Mormons. As a young man he said he had heard nothing but negative statements about the Church. Then he became acquainted with some Mormons, and finding them to be of exemplary character, concluded that all of the things he had heard to the contrary were false. Now, he said, being in the same room with 600 Mormons and hearing President McKay convinced him that his favorable impression had been the right one all along.

It was also under President McKay that the Church first turned to professional public relations specialists outside the Church for professional assistance. Robert Mullen, whose firm I worked for and later bought, advised the Church for a number of years in ways that helped broaden Church exposure. He recommended that the Tabernacle Choir record with the Philadelphia Orchestra and worked especially hard at getting the press to cover the Palmyra pageant, all to show that Mormonism was not bounded by the limits of the Salt Lake Valley. He later wrote a non-proselyting book about the Church, which has been widely reviewed and well received. Mullen's advice fit well with President McKay's view of a world church.

Spencer W. Kimball also has a good PR sense. He not only relates well to members of the Church, but seems to have a knack for saying the right thing at the right time. In news interviews he is usually able to avoid quibbling and to project Christian love. During the press conference at the opening of the Washington Temple Visitors Center, for example, he was asked the question, "Do you think you will ever have a woman apostle?" He smiled and said, "Who knows? We'll have to wait and see."

I think we still have major challenges

in developing our relationship with the non-Mormon public, though. As the Church becomes more diverse and wide-ranging, we must be more careful about the images we create of ourselves in the public mind. We must be careful not to mislead the public. For example, Brigham Young University is now the largest church-related university in the world, a source of considerable pride to us. It is also a place where students are well-groomed and modestly dressed, which stamps it as something of a rarity. If we over-publicize this latter fact, however, at the expense of stressing the academic achievements of the school and its faculty, we run the risk of placing BYU in the league of certain evangelical institutions of lesser academic quality. This could hurt BYU graduates as they hit the job market, and as a Church PR matter, alienate an important segment of the public that might otherwise be kindly disposed toward us.

As another example: Many non-Mormons have adopted the Family Home Evening Program, and others have recommended it on a community-wide basis. Our leadership in building family ties will bear fruit both in potential converts and in general good will. On the other hand, if we place too much emphasis on Home Evening, the public may come to perceive it as some kind of unique ritual, similar to the Jewish Sabbath performed by Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. People will say they like it but still feel turned away.

And we must understand that mere publicity in itself is not as effective as some might think. Many church-originated stories end up on the religion page of the newspapers, which is the least read page in the paper.

All in all, Church leaders have great PR material with which to work and our relationships with our various publics should steadily improve. But we will need more skill than ever before in our history. I think the Church's decision to produce an hour-long TV special in prime time markets demonstrates a keen awareness of this. It augurs well for the future of the Church public relations. Ultimately, however, we will all need to bear in mind that the Church's image depends upon and always will depend upon the individual behavior of its members.

If It's Written by A Living General Authority, It Will Sell: A Report on Mormon Publishing

According to Duane Crowther, founder and manager of Horizon Publishing, "Church publishers are 'lengthening their stride' to keep pace with the rapid growth of the Church. All five of the publishers of traditional church books are expanding their facilities. Deseret Book has completed its attractive new building in downtown Salt Lake City. Hawkes Publishing built their own facility last year. Within the past decade Bookcraft moved into a new location and is again pondering expansion. BYU Press is in a modern new plant, and Horizon is negotiating the purchase of a permanent home almost three times larger than its current building."

Standing as influential and omnipresent as ever is Deseret Book Company, making no secret of its official role as publishing arm for the general authorities and purveyor *par excellance* of LDS gift books. Their books cover a wide range of subject matter—from scripture to homemaking to some recent history titles by luminaries from the