

# Public Relations & Marketing Communications: It is all about the questions you ask.

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*By Roger Pynn, President, Curley & Pynn Public Relations*

Every manager, every C-suite executive, every business owner today knows that part of his or her responsibilities is to manage public relations and marketing communications activity.

In an increasingly complex media world where the average person is bombarded with 3,000 messages per day, to the untrained eye this can seem like an overwhelming and complex maze of decisions that could go terribly wrong and have enormous bottom line impacts.

In reality, while the practice of public relations and marketing communications is complex and requires that practitioners work hard to stay abreast of ever-changing techniques and technology, there are four simple questions that drive the whole process.

The purpose of this paper is to help the non-practitioner better understand how communicators go about the development of programs that help their clients solve problems and take advantage of commercial opportunity. In the end, it should help managers at all levels make better decisions about how their communications budgets are spent.

## **It Starts with Audience Identification**

Think of public relations and marketing communications like bow and arrow hunting.

If you can't see your prey, it is hardly worth pulling an arrow from your quiver. You've no doubt heard the phrase "target marketing," but what does it mean?

The most basic question you have to ask is simply "***Who Do We Want To Communicate With?***" Your answer could be as simple as a list of a half dozen key decision-makers on a city council who will vote a project up or down, or it could be a list of special interest groups who could influence their decision ... such as:

- **Neighboring Voters**
- **Conservation Groups**
- **Growth Management Advocates**

- **City Staff & Advisors**
- **News Media**

It could be even more complex and you might have to break those groups down even further, either due to strongly held opinions and positions determined by research or because of different media needed to reach them, i.e.:

- **Neighboring Voters**
  - Longtime residents (mostly elderly)
  - Newcomers (The New Meadows subdivision)
  - Hispanic residents
- **Conservation Groups**
  - Sierra (very opposed to new construction)
  - Audubon Society (concerned only with water issues)
  - Arbor Club (demands tree planting by all developers)
- **Growth Management Advocates**
  - Council for Planned Growth (60-member pro developer group)
  - Citizens Against Concrete (have petitioned for building moratorium)
- **City Staff & Advisors**
  - Planning Department (bitterly divided staff)
  - Environmental Protection Department (anti growth)
  - Tax Assessor/Collector (concerned about deficits)
- **News Media**
  - The New Town News (cautious growth advocate)
  - The Old Town News (opposed to all growth)
  - Verdad (caters to Our Town's rapidly growing Hispanic sector)

It is easy to see that each of these subsets will need a strategy if you are to communicate effectively for your project. But before you start, there are other questions to answer now that you know who you want to communicate with.

### Hold that Arrow Just a Second

Just as it goes without saying that you don't want to pull back your arrow before you can see the target, you probably want to know a little more about the target before you let it go.

For instance, you'd want to know how far away the target is so you know how far back to pull in order to get the arrow to go the distance. In communication, the one thing you have to know about the people you want to communicate with is *“What Do They Know About Us?”*

This is what communicators call the Research Phase ... and it is incredibly important. Think for a second, you may perceive that everyone is opposed to your project and set off to convince them otherwise without doing any research when in fact if you conduct a survey you'll find that all they want is for you to make a commitment to landscaping and water retention ponds. In the case of our town council example, it would probably require the use of several tools, such as:

- A telephone survey of a statistically accurate sample of the population (probably 400 interviews) that allows you to find out what they know about your project, what attitudes they hold about development, conservation and other issues, whether they are, in fact, predisposed to support or oppose you and what it would take to make them want to support you.
  - The results of this could be cross tabulated by demographics to tell you what opinions are held by special interest groups:
    - Older Longtime Residents
    - Newcomers
    - Hispanics
- A series of one-on-one visits with people identified as opinion leaders to determine how they might influence media and those who will actually vote.
- A focus group ... a private session with a small sample of citizens to review your messages with them to determine how they resonate and which ones to use.

### Now that we know our prey ...

It is time now to ask ourselves *“What Do We Want Them To Know?”* and *“What Do We Want Them To Do?”*

This is the beginning of the campaign ... where you determine the key messages that your research has told you will resonate, will respond to the public’s concerns and will help you either convince them to change their mind (if you find they were opposed) or will reinforce their positive disposition to support you.

Here’s an example of how that worked in a project we managed for the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County on Florida’s Treasure Coast.

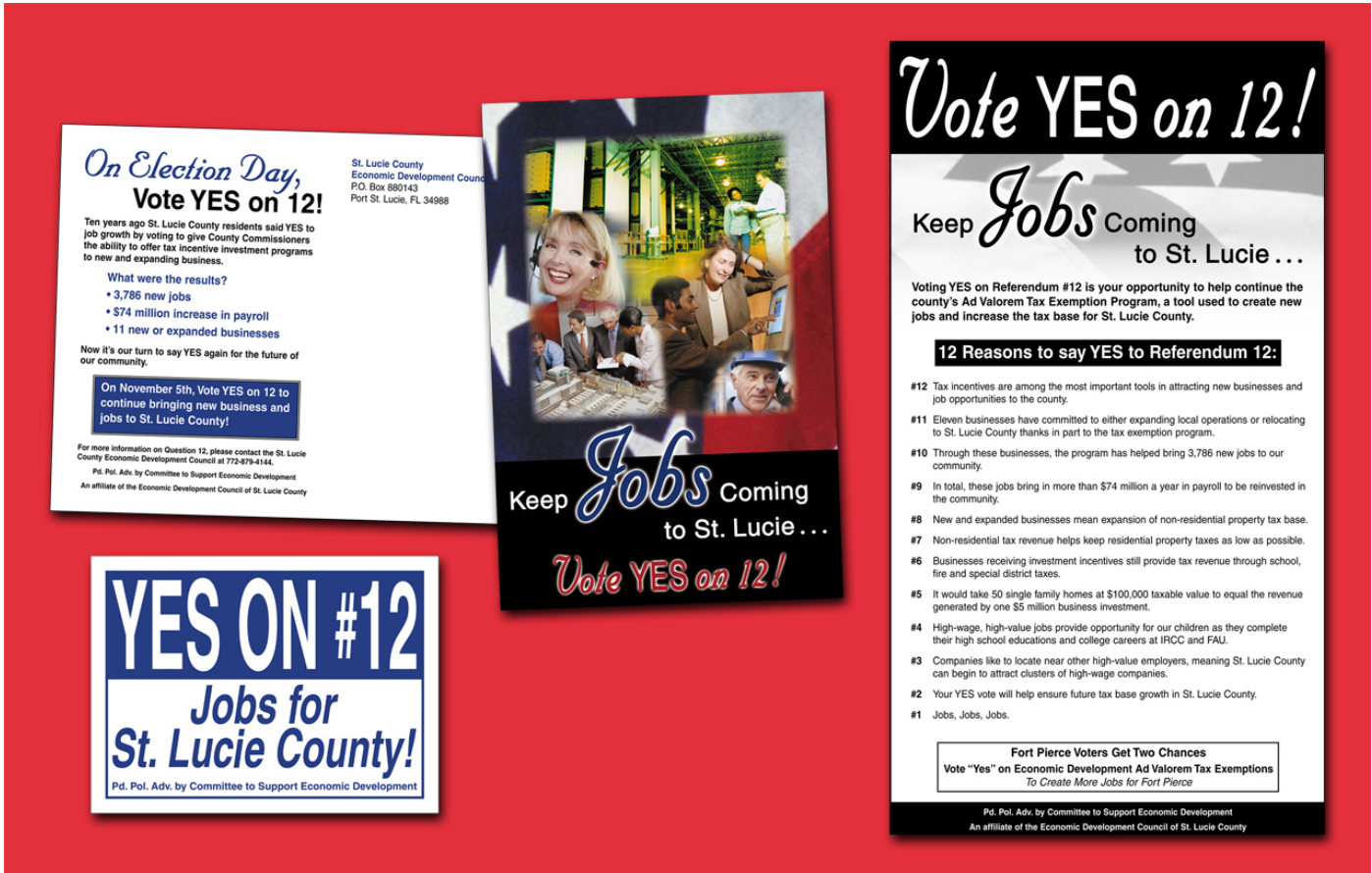
St. Lucie County, Florida, for years had a tax abatement incentive program to drive economic development, which was set to expire. Continuation of the program, which provides tax relief to companies relocating or expanding in the area, required a public referendum.

County leaders believed it would be a tough sell, and that the message that would resonate with voters is how incentives create increased tax base. But, they had forgotten the most important part of any communications strategy ... research. They were basing their strategy on their own experience, rather than on the perceptions of voters.

We conducted statistically accurate research that showed voters overwhelmingly were in favor of the program; but that they were unaware it was up for renewal or even where the referendum would appear on the ballot. We also found that “jobs,” not tax base, was the real issue.

Armed with this information, we conducted a county-wide campaign to communicate two key messages. What we wanted them to know was:

- A “yes” vote meant new jobs; and,



- The referendum was No. 12 on the ballot.

What we wanted them to do was simple:

- Support new jobs by voting yes on No. 12.

The referendum passed with more than 66 percent of the vote.

### The Great Prophet Howard Hill

Every project ... every company needs a strategy ... and that strategy always begins by asking the four questions we’ve reviewed:

- Who Do You Want to Communicate With?
- What Do They Know About You?
- What Do You Want Them to Know?
- What Do You Want Them to Do?

I'm reminded of the great bow and arrow hunter Howard Hill who said:

**“Unless you know your game’s feeding, sleeping, and daily habits, unless you plan your hunt in great detail and follow your plan with precision, you are not hunting at all ... You’re just walking in the woods.”**

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Roger Pynn, APR, has been part of Florida’s professional communications community since the late sixties ... beginning his career as an award-winning journalist with the *Orlando Sentinel*, where he rose from reporter to metropolitan editor.

Since the early 1970s, he has been involved in both consulting and corporate-based public relations, and prior to establishing Curley & Pynn, he directed public relations for Westinghouse Electric Corporation’s Power Generation World Headquarters in Orlando.

Pynn is accredited by both the Florida Public Relations Association and the Public Relations Society of America. A former president of both organizations’ Central Florida affiliates, he served three times as a statewide vice president of FPRA, and has co-chaired the Ethics Judicial Panel of PRSA for Florida.

He is a frequent speaker before national trade and professional associations, public relations organizations and college classrooms on topics of ethics and issues management in public relations.