

# Who is helping you to help others?

Organizations that deal with the public typically have one or more frontline people. These people deal directly with the public, perhaps by giving directions, meeting and greeting or assisting in some way. Many times, these frontline people are also some of the least well compensated in the organization. But they are crucial in shaping how the public perceives the organization.

Have you ever walked into an office where the receptionist didn't even bother to greet you? Have you stood waiting for help at a "customer service" booth? Then you know that your interaction with people that are supposed to assist you can color how you perceive the organization that they represent. However, many organizations don't seem to grasp this simple concept and continue to deploy people in "helping" positions that are unwilling or unable to help, therefore damaging the credibility and perception of the organization.

**Here's a tip: if you are hiring someone to help you to deal with the public make sure that persons LIKES helping people.**

On my last trip, I had trouble checking in on the kiosk. So, a very unhelpful, surly guy came over, growled at me and told me to go wait in line. He was absolutely rude and unpleasant. Do you think that makes me feel positive toward the airline in question?

Yesterday, I was in downtown DC to meet with a client. She had her laptop with her and we needed to go somewhere with WiFi. I couldn't think where the nearest Cosi was, but DC has deployed Downtown DC people in the Gallery Place area. I went up a woman with the Downtown DC jacket and asked her if she knew where the nearest Cosi was. She did. She gave us specific,

perfect directions. She was helpful (and right). Contrast that with an exchange I had witnessed earlier inside a Metro station. A gentleman had approached the booth to ask a question, and the lady in the booth was BERATING him for tapping on her window. Does that make Metro look helpful? (BTW, I have had similar experiences with people in the booths...they just don't want to be bothered to do their jobs, that is, assisting people.)

As a marketing consultant, I can advise you to take a good look at who is dealing with public in your organization. These people are crucial because they create the first (and maybe the only) impression the public will have of your organization.

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## Again with public perception

In today's *Washington Post*, Steven Pearlstein writes about Wall Street executives (more specifically AIG executives) who are so blind to public perception that they keep stumbling and looking worse. In case you have been avoiding the news, AIG gave some of its top executives millions of dollars in bonuses, while on the receiving end of government/taxpayer money. Nobody but AIG is happy about this. Currently and mostly due to the economic crisis, there is a tremendous amount of populist rage and ill will toward Wall Street and "fat cats" such as Bernie Madoff, who seem to be living the high life while many people are down in the dumps.

Yesterday I wrote about the Facebook redesign and many others have been writing/complaining across the blogosphere and in real life.

What do AIG and Facebook have in common? Not understanding how

they are perceived and that perception matters. Both companies have proceeded with business as usual without so much a look in the rear view mirror. Perception is currency, in the most real, dollar sense, which is why the practice of public relations exists. Companies hire PR agencies to help them manage and in most cases improve the public perception of them.

Sometimes, as in the case of Facebook, there seems to be a complete disregard for how core audiences will react to news and changes. There are simple ways to prevent this: testing in the form of focus groups or surveys or even simple conversations with current users. It's about getting outside the bubble. Come to think of it, don't bubbles always burst? Soap bubbles, housing bubbles, tech bubbles to name a few.

In the case of AIG, it has much to do with Wall Street culture, in which greed is good (as the movie Wall Street pointed out) and money is king. The more money, the better. After all, Wall Street is not some nonprofit organization with some altruistic purpose in mind. The whole raison d'être for it is to make money. So it stands to reason that the only thing AIG execs understand is money. Something soft and unmeasurable like public anger is a small price to pay. Except when it isn't. I think the fat cat era may be nearing its end (at least until the next bubble forms).

