



# Teaching Public Relations

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## Brainstorming: We Can Teach "Creativity"

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As more and more public relations instructors are being asked to teach advertising and integrated marketing communication courses, we will become even more exposed to advertising concepts and pedagogy. By doing so, we'll learn even more about the creative process traditionally taught in advertising classes and how it can be applied to teaching public relations courses, particularly the campaign and writing classes.

I experienced this process and it helped me develop a "teaching brainstorming" model that can be used in both our campaign and writing classes and, obviously, in the integrated marketing communication classes.

The American Association for Higher Education, the Education Commission of the States, and the Johnson Foundation recently funded the development of a model designed to encourage excellence in undergraduate education. The model contains seven principles. While all are relevant for public relations educators, the third is particularly important for us. It reads:

**Good Practice Encourages Active Learning:** Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves. (1)

Teaching brainstorming is one instructional activity which can help us move our students from the sidelines to the playing field. Even though it might be true that the most common brainstorming image in our culture is of a group of advertising copywriters sitting around a table struggling to come up with a creative idea, public relations managers do it too. Many ideas that produced Silver Anvil winners resulted from hours of brainstorming, especially in the development of special events and product promotional campaigns.

This article suggests how to organize a brainstorming unit in a public relations campaign course. It is based on teaching the subject in my department's two integrated undergraduate and graduate marketing communication courses (which had a 50% public relations component) and in a graduate-level public relations techniques course. Ideally, the unit can be covered in two 80-minute sessions. The first session is designed to introduce students to the creative process and its relationship to brainstorming. The second is a simulated brainstorming session, with the instructor functioning as a facilitator.

## SESSION NUMBER ONE: HOW TO BE CREATIVE

### Personalizing Brainstorming in Public Relations

The first session outlines the basic principles behind creativity and its relationship to brainstorming. I opened the class showing my students a Belgian endive. I described how this product became part of the nouvelle cuisine craze of the 1980s. I then presented my class the following problem: The Belgian Endive Growers Association came to my agency with very little money and asked us to produce a "publicity" killing. All they needed was one "big hit" -- one national story in the media which could support the introduction of the product in supermarkets. My former boss, Jonathan Weisberg, who now heads consumer public relations at Bristol Myers, called a brainstorming meeting. We bounced around many ideas until he proclaimed: "Tootsie Salad!"

"Tootsie Salad?"

When my students looked totally blank, I played them a scene from the movie "Tootsie" which produced Weisberg's creative idea. Dustin Hoffman, playing an unemployed actor, is begging his agent for a role proclaiming:

"I did an evening of vegetables on Off-Broadway. I did the best tomato, the best cucumber. I did an endive salad that knocked the critics off their feet."

I outlined to my class how we then wrote and sent to the press a release announcing the official launch of the "Tootsie Salad" which contained Belgian endives (replacing lettuce) and a basic vinaigrette dressing. Weisberg's idea worked beyond anything imaginable. Associated Press, United Press International and many food columnists in magazines and newspapers picked up the release, and overnight the popularity of Belgian endives as a salad ingredient increased.

### Defining Creativity

In order to be able to help students learn to brainstorm effectively, I found it necessary to improve their understanding of the meaning of creativity. I introduced a definition written by advertising educator James Marra, who defines creativity in his new book: *Advertising Creativity: Techniques for Generating Ideas*, as follows:

A large part of Creativity is the creative individual's ability to think by connections, many times by analogies and metaphors: Something is like or suggests something else. And this connection provides the spark for creativity ideas. (2)

I used this definition and Weisberg's work as the launching pad to conduct a general discussion about creativity. We looked at such issues as the differences between being creative and talented, whether individuals are born creative, and whether creativity can be taught.

As part of the discussion, I presented my students examples of creativity from Woody Allen and Mel Brooks films, Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, and selections from a documentary on the work of Van Gogh. We focused our attention on the artist's ability to make a new association from one set of realities to a new pleasantly surprising or shocking one, such as Mel Brooks' "Pizza the Hut" character from his popular movie "Spaceballs."

### Understanding the Creative Process

To demonstrate the creative process in front of my class, I returned to our colleague, Marra. Borrowing

heavily from Graham Wallas' book, *The Art of Thought*, Alex Osborne's (he's the "O" in BBD&O), *Applied Imagination*, and James Webb Young's *A Technique for Producing Ideas*, Marra introduces the following schema to describe the creative process:

PREPARATION: Research; the gathering of ideas

INCUBATION: Playing with the ideas

ILLUMINATION: Eureka! I got it!

VALIDATION: Test out the idea

Marra suggests, and I followed his advice in teaching the subject, that the best way to understand the creative process is to compare it to buying a gift.<sup>(3)</sup> I taught this unit right before Christmas and Mother's Day when my students were naturally trying to think creatively to buy gifts, and I tapped into this interest to improve their understanding of the process.

### Learning to Make Associations

To brainstorm effectively, participants must develop the skills to participate in a free-association idea-generation process. Drawing on the examples I presented from art and humor, I asked my students to pretend that they were on a therapist's couch and they had to play the word association game. I then showed my students how the famous advertising agency of Doyle Dane Bernbach did the same when producing a group of print ads for Volkswagen which contributed to the launch of the creative revolution in advertising.

The following are the ads' headlines and a summary of the visuals. ·

- Think Small (a tiny Beetle)
- Lemon (a yellow Beetle)
- Relieve Gas Pains (a photo of VW rabbit)
- Rabbit Transit (photo of a VW rabbit) <sup>(4)</sup>

I also presented to my students two ads that Marra uses to illustrate the art of association. They are: ·

- The story board for Wendy's "Where's the Beef" campaign ·
- The print ad and the story board for the Partnership for A Drug Free America's campaign with the following copy and visual inserted in both: "This is your brain. (an egg) This is drugs. (frying pan) This is your brain on drugs." (a fried egg) <sup>(5)</sup>

In conclusion, to really dramatize how the association process can produce creativity, I showed my class a print ad for Perdue chickens with a photo of Frank Perdue next to the rump of a chicken and discussed the rumors that the idea for him to be the spokesperson resulted from the fact that he does look like a chicken!

### It's Reality Time

My students were literally "flying of the walls" now. They were ready to brainstorm In the simulated session I promised. To further encourage this behavior, I read to them George Lois's opinions on creativity from his new book, *What's the Big Idea*.

... all great advertising must be part of an intricate mosaic that includes extensive research, market planning, media analysis, and all the building blocks of marketing. But these disciplines are worthless if the advertising sucks. (Lois's word!)

Great advertising comes down to The Big Idea, although I never create the ideas that characterize my work. I snare them from the air as they float around me. The common denominator of all my work is an unremitting quest for the Big Idea because the Big Idea -- a surprising solution to a marketing problem, expressed in memorable verbal and/ or graphic imagery -- is the authentic source of communicative power. (6)

### "Snare Them From the Air?"

I asked my students: What does this mean? In concluding my introductory class to creativity, I discussed with them the fact that to participate in a brainstorming session they can't simply "snare ideas from the air." They needed the "building blocks" that George Lois seems to denigrate and, yet, paradoxically respects:

I regard research as an essential discipline of the advertising life, but I also believe that when research is used to excess it can smother inspiration. A sensible balance is needed so that the science of research can strengthen and even inspire the creative process, rather than control it. I believe that advertising, an art, cannot be predicted or predicated on the basis of scientific methodology. (7)

I then gave my students a simple assignment which would serve as their "admission" to the brainstorming session and function as a reinforcement to understand the value of the building blocks. The first was to bring to the session an object that helps make them feel creative (legal, of course, and no tobacco). My reasoning was that during the brainstorming sessions I participated in as a former professional, I witnessed this spontaneous behavior among my colleagues and I believe that it encourages creative thinking. I recall colleagues bringing to the sessions such items as: a bag of Doritos, a package of licorice, a Dove Bar, a baseball glove and ball, a favorite wind-up toy (me!), and a promotional beachball to throw around (me again!).

The second assignment was to complete the last three sections of the following case study. I took the facts from an October 25, 1991 issue of the *Wall Street Journal*.

CASE STUDY: A New Seven Eleven is coming to our city

FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT: Sales slumping for the past three years for this giant food chain

COMPETITION: Express lines in supermarkets; gas stations that are also functioning as convenience stores

CONSUMER PERCEPTION: (Based on research data from October 25, 1991 *Wall Street Journal*)

*Store Image:* Poor quality merchandise, particularly produce and dairy products. No variety. Pricing is too expensive. Products sold are only the small size. Stores have a "sleazy look" to them, particularly in the late evenings. Consumers expressed basic fears of shopping in the stores at night and during the day when teenagers hang out in front of the stores.

*Convenience:* Not anymore; most of the time there is only one cashier and it is faster to shop at an express line at a supermarket.

SEVEN ELEVEN SOLUTION: "50 stores have been renovated to look like the old brightly lighted Mom-and-Pop groceries. Premium prices have been slashed to supermarket levels and the small-size-only offerings that used to cram shelves have been replaced with economy size packages. Fresh produce, pasta and sandwiches have been added. To speed up

the sometimes sluggish checkout process, two clerks work the cash registers." (*WSJ* article citing the test marketing of the new Seven Eleven in Texas)

**CLASS ASSIGNMENT:** In preparation for the brainstorming session, write an objective/positioning statement, and a message strategy to officially launch the first new Seven Eleven in our city, to be opened in the financial district.

## SESSION TWO: THE BRAINSTORMING CLASS

In order for the brainstorming class to work, I split the group in half and we held two sessions of approximately ten to fifteen students. To get a better feel for the value of a brainstorming session, we met around the table in a conference room setting.

Based on my experiences of teaching this unit last fall, spring and summer, the following are five suggestions on how to conduct a brainstorming session citing examples from the Seven Eleven case study.

**1. Establish Structure and the Parameters for the Creativity:** I accomplished this by having the students write the objective, positioning statement and the message strategy. In the Seven Eleven case study, my students agreed on the following three:

*Objective:* To launch Seven Eleven's new image in our city.

*Positioning Statement:* The convenience and atmosphere of a supermarket in a convenience size store.

*Message Strategy:* New! New! New! -- Using a special event to make the announcement which would generate publicity.

Once we agreed on these three, I announced that all ideas bounced around had to include these three critical "building blocks" in them or we were simply wasting our time.

**2. Encourage informality, fun and teamwork:** I anticipated this by asking my students to bring an object that makes them feel creative; they would feel more relaxed, and this worked. I also announced that there should be no hand raising and students should simply enjoy themselves bouncing around ideas. I tried to encourage more informality by suggesting they put their feet on the desk, sit in a reclining position, take their shoes off...

**3. Work on associations to stimulate discussion:** Initially my students were reluctant, but they began to freely associate as the session "warmed up." In looking at the video I made of the Seven Eleven session, I saw my students associating the store opening with celebrities, products, and the city in general. Some ideas were:

- Holding a look-a-like contest involving Pittsburgh's Mayor, Sophie Mosolof, who is a 5-foot, 72-year-old grandmother with an oversized bouffant hairdo.
- Making the world's longest sub sandwich and selling the slices to support a worthy charity.
- Having the local engineering school's robot make subs.
- Having a contest among the city's leading athletes to see who can make the fastest sandwich.

These ideas were ultimately rejected because they were not strategically appropriate. But the role of an effective brainstorming facilitator is to work with the class and such ideas to find that "big idea."

**4. Let the students do the talking:** This is a challenge because the instructor will naturally be drawn into the fun and the creativity of the brainstorming session. In reviewing video tapes of the session, I found this happening to me. I noticed that, at times, I interrupted my students. Worse yet, on a number of occasions I told my students their idea was "dumb" even though a number of their peers appeared to be trying to make the criticism themselves.

**5. Encourage the typical silent student to participate:** Most teaching experts advise us not to call on students who do not raise their hands in class discussion. In this more relaxed environment, the rules might change. When conducting the brainstorming sessions, I always scanned the room looking for an excuse -- whether laughter, quietly sharing an idea, or just simple eye contact -- to connect with my quieter students. Most responded with enthusiasm!

## CONCLUSION/EVALUATION

Perhaps this last benefit-motivating "non-talkers" to participate in class, is enough of a reason to try brainstorming in our classes. In the student evaluations of my teaching, the creativity and brainstorming classes drew the most written praise. I also got verbal feedback: the students enjoyed the experience and learned some thing from it.

## NOTES

1. Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson, editors, *Applying the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1991), Appendix C, 11.
2. James L Marra, *Advertising Creativity: Techniques For Generating Ideas* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 2.
3. Ibid., 3-4.
4. Bruce Bendinger, *The Copy Workshop Workbook* (Chicago: The Copy Workshop, 1990) Third Edition, 38-39.
5. Marra, Op Cit, 116-17, 186
6. George Lois, *What's the Big Idea? How to Win With Outrageous Ideas (that sell)* (New York Doubleday, 1991), 46.
7. Ibid., 121.

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