

# Teaching Public Relations

## Action-Reaction Exercises Bridge Theory-Practice Gap

By Charles A. Fleming, Associate Professor, Oklahoma State University

Action-reaction exercises patterned after similar techniques in military colleges can bridge the gap between public relations theory in the classroom and professional practice in the real world.

Military schools use action-reaction techniques to improve reaction time and decision making. Such exercises are ideal for teaching the realities of public relations practice -- complete with deadlines, unexpected events, stress and executives who change their minds or do not know exactly what to do.

### THREE PHASES

There are three main parts to the exercise

\*First, students are assigned as public relations executives of an organization and are given background on the organization and its surrounding community.

\*Second, student PR directors are given a series of typical events which affect their organization or community.

\*Third, students react to the events by a deadline. Reaction involves analyzing the event, developing a response within certain guidelines and putting recommendations in the proper form.

Realism is added by imposing time limits, by changing guidance and decisions as the exercise progresses, and by not announcing occurrences in advance.

Students may use whatever references they want. Typewritten answers are required, so the availability of a writing laboratory is important.

Physical preparation of the exercise by the instructor is simple. Background for both the organization and the community will fit on one or two typewritten pages. Background should be issued several classes before the exercise so students can become familiar with the situation.

### SELECTING THE ORGANIZATION

While almost any kind of organization can be used, ones that have been successful and offer a variety of potential problems are a small manufacturing company, a school district, a hospital, and a PR agency with several clients. Exposure to different types of organizations and their peculiar problems gives students a wider scope.

Whatever type of organization and community are picked, students must be given enough basic information to make sound decisions.

They should know the purpose of the organization, size and history, status of internal and external relations, attitudes of executives, calendar of significant events, resources of the PR department and current PR activities. Community demographics, attitude toward the organization, past problems, status of press relations and media present must be discussed.

Assignment sheets are divided down the middle, with events listed on the left and corresponding student tasks listed on the right. Only a few events and tasks are issued at a time. While events should follow some logical sequence, some may change earlier guidance and decisions.

Edited by Prof. Todd Hunt, Rutgers University School of Communication, Information & Library Studies

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The exercise can be as long as the instructor wants, although several class periods are ideal. New events and tasks are issued at irregular intervals throughout the exercise.

## EVALUATION

Grading is a challenge since there are no perfect answers and students have different but equally suitable ways of attacking the same problems. Judging writing quality and number of tasks finished on time are two aspects of evaluation.

Student reactions can be evaluated by comparing them with requirements identified in advance on the instructor's solution sheet. For example, if a press kit is to be prepared, the instructor might say an acceptable reply has the kit containing a schedule of events, biography of an official, history of the firm and photographs with captions, among other things.

A post-exercise critique is essential and should include the criteria for each satisfactory response as well as a discussion of different ways to solve the same problems.

## A SAMPLE EXERCISE

To understand how the exercise works, look at one example for a small manufacturing company.

As new PR directors, students are asked to write portions of a PR handbook. Tasks might include writing objectives for the firm's community relations program and outlining a crisis communication plan. Whatever policies are established must be followed later.

The first major event is the chief executive's announcement that the firm will "go all out" for its upcoming 25th anniversary. The PR director is asked to plan a special event.

Students describe the event, propose a rough budget and plan pre-event publicity. They also prepare an agenda for a staff meeting they will chair to announce plans and assign responsibilities.

When a decision is made to issue advance news releases, students write the lead paragraphs, describe accompanying photographs and write captions.

Two 15-second radio spots are part of advance publicity. Contents of a press kit have to be identified.

Students next outline a speech the company president will give to a local service club. A program for a press party in advance of the event must be developed, and invitations to the press are drafted.

When the big day arrives, everything runs smoothly until an accident in the plant injures two employees and a visitor.

Students issue an initial press statement and make followups as more information is available. Press queries are received that demand immediate replies. A reluctant CEO compounds the problem by not being candid with the press.

When a press conference is announced, students prepare an agenda, list anticipated questions and suggested answers. Points to emphasize are noted. Day, time and site are determined.

A wrap-up statement is issued after the anniversary is over and the dust settles.

The accident causes a portion of the plant to be shut down, and students must grapple with the problem of employee lay-offs.

Next, students issue statements to the press after an investigation is completed, and the CEO asks his PR director to write a condolence letter to the spouse of an injured employee.

## STUDENT REACTION

Students say this type of exercise is challenging, interesting and a good way to apply classroom theory to practical situations. The exercise helps teach decision making and thinking in the face of deadlines, and is a good way to judge understanding of principles and techniques.

Exercises like this can involve a variety of PR basics, from fundamental principles, communication tools and skills, to staff functioning, ethics and law. Action-reaction exercises tie it all together and help bridge the gap between classroom and practice.

## SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT

Before the end of the month, you learn that the state has suffered financial setbacks and the school budget must be cut 20%. This means 50 teachers and four staff will be laid off at year's end. Some classes will be larger, some HS courses will be dropped. The School Board and superintendent will decide how budget cuts will be implemented.

Prepare a press statement you'll give to local media when you get the OK.

Prepare your PR plan for informing everyone of the cutbacks.

- a. Describe your internal plan.
- b. Identify publics, self-interests, objectives, themes and communication tools.