



# Teaching Public Relations

Published by the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Edited by Dr. Gay Wakefield, Director of the M. J. Neeley Center for Productive Communication, Texas Christian University

[Editor's Note: Dr. Todd Hunt, Rutgers University was editor of *Teaching Public Relations* at the time this issue was originally published.]

No. 16, January 1990

## Structured Interviews Bring Case Study Course to Life

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It is generally accepted that case study *courses* are valuable in teaching public relations concepts at an advanced level. However, case study *textbooks* have limitations. I found two main drawbacks when I began teaching case study courses three years ago at Oklahoma State University (OSU).

First, textbook cases become outdated quickly, at least from the student's perspective. Second, many cases are about large organizations in distant locations. This makes cases difficult for my students to relate to and class becomes a boring experience. In addition, OSU is located in the small community of Stillwater, Oklahoma, where there is an extreme lack of major companies and public relations speakers.

### The Solution

My solution was to require out-of-town practitioner interviews as part of my Advanced Public Relations course. These student interviews have become the central element of the course and a significant part of course grades. The interviews are more than "watch-someone-work" sessions. Students must investigate, analyze and report on a minimum of eight areas based on public relations concepts.

The student interviews began as team assignments, but this approach had many of the problems of other team efforts. Some students had limited involvement, while others did more than their share.

Today, each student must interview a separate public relations practitioner. Students are instructed to avoid marketing, advertising or personnel people who may claim to do public relations. Interviews with people not specifically doing public relations work on a full-time basis will not satisfy the visit report requirements. My advance approval of the interviewees usually prevents inappropriate subjects.

The interviewee selection is done early in the semester so the students have plenty of time to coordinate their schedules. Students are provided a list of "off limits" organizations which have been visited in the past year. However, there is an adequate supply of available interviewees in Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Interviews with Public Relations Society of America members are encouraged.

While the initiative to select is left to the students, the interviews cannot be made in Stillwater where

practitioners have been overused for projects.

Prior to the actual interviews the students must write letters to the interviewees outlining in detail the subject areas to be covered and provide verification copies to me.

## Interview Content

The interviews must cover the following areas:

*(1) Structure of the overall organization to determine where the public relations department is in the organization and its importance and relationship to other parts of the organization.* This provides good class discussion material because of the great variety of organizational structures and the position of public relations departments. Some departments are integral to the overall organizational management process while other departments are primarily communications producers.

*(2) Overall objectives and main audiences of the organization.* This helps students to understand how effective public relations objectives should be in harmony with organizational objectives and how public relations activities should target audiences.

*(3) The structure of the public relations department.* Students should determine the relationship of the various sections within the department. Some interviews are with one-person departments, but this provides good comparison of public relations work for class discussion.

*(4) Definition of the department's function and list of goals.* Are they in writing? Surprisingly, many times they are not. This is an important teaching point, since the course emphasizes the importance of written objectives and plans in the public relations management process.

*(5) Public relations problems the organization has and how they are being dealt with.* Often the interviews focus on one current problem as an example. This provides excellent supplemental case study discussion material.

*(6) Main on-going public relations programs and primary communications methods of the department.* Students are required to bring for class demonstration examples of written communications materials. These are later turned in and kept in my files for use in other public relations courses.

*(7) Public relations crisis communication plan.* Students should obtain a copy if available. Students learn that, unlike some textbook examples, many organizations do not have a written crisis plan.

*(8) Monitoring and evaluation methods for public relations programs and communication methods.* This is an area where many practitioners do very little. Also, in many textbook case studies little evaluation is done. This provides an important teaching point.

## The Reports

The interviews are followed with two major assignments: written and oral reports. Two copies of the comprehensive written reports are submitted, one for a grade and one for my files which provide material

for exams and student exercises.

The written reports are expected to be very detailed and require students to include analyses based on the public relations concepts covered in the course. In addition to content, writing skills are graded closely.

The oral reports, summaries of the written reports, supplement the case studies and provide close-to-home and current class discussion material. In addition, students are required to take notes on all oral reports for the final exam. Two oral reports of about 15 minutes each are done in a single class period, allowing ample time for class discussion.

### The Benefit

The personal interviews provide information that has more direct relevance to students than textbook cases and give them exposure to "real world" public relations people. This exposure provides a job role model for students who often have difficulty identifying with public relations practitioners. An additional benefit is the potential for student internships and job leads.

There is benefit to the School of Journalism and Broadcasting in exposing public relations practitioners to our students. This visibility is especially important in the Tulsa and Oklahoma City markets where most of the potential financial supporters and job opportunities are located.

The bottom line is that my public relations case study course has come to life. The students have more interest and enthusiasm for Advanced Public Relations, and so do I.

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Posted July 2, 1999