



# Teaching Public Relations

Published by the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Edited by Professor Todd Hunt, Rutgers University

No. 35, February 1994

## Teaching with Telephones in Public Relations Classes

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*(Editor's note: This article is based on presentations made at teaching workshops for AEJMC's Public Relations Division and PRSA's Educators Division.)*

**L**ike all teachers of public relations, when I am asked "What is the basic skill of the public relations profession?" I usually answer without hesitation: "Writing, of course!" In fact, I am on record as saying so in at least two textbooks.'

But the more I talk with my former students who are in the field, I realize that I may be wrong. Most of them say they spend as much time on the telephone as they do at their word-processing computer stations. Day in and day out, they are calling clients, sources, coalition members, contractors, experts, government agencies -- and sometimes their former professors -- to obtain the information they need or to convince someone to use the information they have prepared. When you stop to think of it, very little writing is accomplished until important telephone calls have been made.

After acknowledging that fact of public relations life, I went to the file cabinet and took out the two dime store plastic telephones that I used to take to the journalism reporting and writing class when I was trying to coach students on how to conduct an interview over the phone. Today the phones are standard equipment for teaching any kind of public relations course.

### **OBJECTIVES**

There are three main objectives for instruction using the telephones:

1. Demonstrate the use of the phone in public relations programs.
2. Give students "on-the-spot" practice in handling clients and working with the press.
3. Raise issues about the most effective ways to persuade people when you cannot use face-to-face communication.

### **EQUIPMENT**

You will need two or more telephones. If you are using a journalism reporting lab for your class, real telephones may be available. Otherwise, dime store props suffice -- and they add an element of play to the course.

An optional adjunct to exercises is a tape recorder, which can be used for reviewing the conversations.

## INSTRUCTOR'S ROLES

The instructor sometimes plays the client or the press contact. This assures that the typical problems and difficulties arise during the conversation. The instructor otherwise assigns roles for the telephone interactions and then acts as discussion leader in the class analysis of what happened and why.

## SITUATIONS

Here are some realistic and challenging situations that can be set up by the instructor:

1. Call a media outlet and determine what editor or reporter is in charge of handling a particular type of story.
2. Call a media outlet and determine if a press packet has been received and if it is useful and sufficient to the reporter.
3. Call a media outlet and determine if the medium will be sending a reporter or camera crew to a news conference or event.
4. Call a media outlet to determine when a story will be used.
5. Call a media outlet to register displeasure with a story and inquire whether a correction or amplification will appear.
6. Call a media outlet to offer the head of your organization as a spokesperson (or op-ed page author) on a leading issue.
7. Call a client to explain why a story did not appear after coverage was promised by the media.
8. Call a reticent client to encourage him or her to meet the press and be available for questioning.
9. Call an elected official and suggest the formation of a coalition around an issue of importance to your organization.
10. Call the CEO of your firm and explain why "no comment" is not a useful stand to take on an issue of importance.
11. Call the CEO to deliver the news that the plant is on fire and describe how you are handling the situation.
12. Call your spouse to say that you will be home early tonight and explain why you blew the whistle on your organization for a breach of ethics, which is why the CEO fired you.
13. Convince the engineer who is the head of the very busy research and development department of your organization to give you two hours of interview time for research you are doing on the company communication manual.
14. Call the corporate donations vice president (who was bumped out of the pecking order for CEO several years ago) and explain why you think the company should donate to a multicultural education project at the university that is being organized by your former public relations professor.
15. Call your former public relations professor and try to set up an internship that will bring you bright young public relations people who can help you do your job.

## EVALUATION

Students find the phone conversations enjoyable and a valuable learning experience, especially if the instructor plays it straight and makes them think on their feet. The class learns much more by observing the phone calls and thinking about how they would handle a similar situation than they would if they merely read an article about telephone techniques.

Instead of "grading" students on their phone calls, ask the class to offer their evaluations of which persuasive techniques or lines of conversation aided the public relations professional in achieving the stated goals. The instructor's final role, then, is to list on the blackboard the most useful points that come up in class discussion.

## NOTES

1. Todd Hunt, "Teaching Public Relations Writing," in Judy VanSlyke Turk, Ed., *Learning to Teach* (Educators Section, PRSA, 1991) p.171; James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984) p.375.

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*Last updated March 1997..*