



# Teaching Public Relations

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## Corporate Video Communication Class Improves Public Relations Students' Visual Literacy Skills

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The use of video as a communication tool by public relations practitioners has increased dramatically over the past decade. "Today, using electronic images to communicate a company's corporate culture and tell its story to employees, customers, the public and other vital audiences is not the exception, it's the rule (Shell, 1990, p. 28)." Companies use video in a variety of ways: videoconferencing for executives, video news releases to the public, video newsletters aimed at employees, satellite news conferences to television stations and much more. Dozens of U.S. corporations communicate to their branch offices by television via satellite (Lochte and Crifasi, 1990, p. 2). Technological changes in the video industry have lowered the costs for corporations interested in starting an in-house corporate video department (In Motion, 1992, p. 20). Many organizations have hired outside companies to provide video services.

One direct result of the burgeoning video communication market has been a growing demand for public relations people who are visually literate (Shell, 1990, p. 32). While many students in public relations sequences within journalism schools do take an introductory graphics course, typically they graduate with little exposure to using video as a communication tool because the schools or departments are still heavily print-oriented.

### Visual Literacy

The term visual literacy, which has been used for more than 20 years, has been defined as "learning to appreciate the power of visuals in communication and to express these ideas visually (Schamber, 1986, p. 1) and "...recognizing and valuing visual experience, knowing the formal structures and theory of visual language, and exploring the intuitive aspects of visual knowledge in the computerized studio." (Bamhurst, 1987 p. 11).

Additionally, visual literacy "is not merely comprehension of visual images but an active effort to determine and create patterns (Horton, 1992, p. 685). And, as Kiffane (1992) notes, because more and more people are getting information and forming judgments by visual means, training for visual literacy should start in elementary school.

A growing number of public relations students in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication

have an introduction to visual literacy through the School's basic graphic design course. Additionally, students are exposed to the use of visual media to communicate to publics. But the public relations faculty felt that their exposure wasn't deep enough.

The School decided to develop a course in corporate video communication aimed primarily at students in the public relations sequence. A goal of the course was to build on the foundation students had gotten in the introductory graphics course and in their public relations courses to help expand their use of a visual medium--namely video--to communicate effectively.

One immediate handicap appeared: Because the School was primarily print-oriented, it lacked the necessary equipment to be able to give students hands-on experience. A solution came when a cooperative agreement was worked out with an area company that had a large corporate video department. The course would be team-taught by two Journalism School professors and the head of the company's corporate video department. The company's corporate video facilities and some staff members were made available to the students in the class. Advantages for the School and the company came with this arrangement: The School could offer a much-needed course to its students without having to purchase expensive equipment to develop its own video production facility; and the company could provide *pro bono* service to the university community and beyond.

## **Corporate Video Course**

Two professors, one of whom taught in the public relations sequence and the other in the visual communication sequence, developed the course. The manager of corporate video communication at Burroughs Wellcome Co., a British-based pharmaceutical company with its U.S. corporate headquarters in Research Triangle-Park, N.C., also provided input into the course development and team taught it with the two professors.<sup>1</sup>

The course had a number of objectives: To expose students to the uses of video within an organization; to increase their skills in communicating visually; and to give them practical experience in developing and carrying out a project using video. The project would give them the opportunity to reinforce their learning experience. It was not designed to teach them how to use video cameras or to do hands-on editing, but rather to give them the opportunity to work with both a client and technical staff to carry out a video project from its inception to its completion.

Course enrollment was limited to 15 students because of the nature of the video project and the time limitations of technical staff in Burroughs Wellcome's corporate video department.

## **Course Structure: Building Visual Skills**

At the first class meeting, students saw a video clip from M\*A\*S\*H\*, the long-running television show about a group of physicians and nurses stationed in South Korea during the Korean War. Students viewed the introduction to the show, which sets the stage for the program through visuals and music. They were asked to think about the tape and then discuss what messages they thought were being conveyed visually. The exercise helped students begin to read and interpret visual messages.

During the second week, students viewed clips of public service announcements and discussed how the visual and the verbal aspects of the message fit together to form a whole. Students discussed what they thought was the main message, or lead, of the PSAs they viewed. The exercise helped them begin to think about creating their own messages.

The students were then given a take-home assignment to develop a communication strategy for a specific

event. The assignment was based on an actual communication problem a company had faced. Students were told that a company wanted to introduce new marketing team members at the annual meeting of the marketing/ sales force of a company. They were told that the objective was to introduce through video the new team to the rest of the marketing division in such a way to help create positive feelings toward the new marketing structure and make the new team members "human." Students were given background information about the company, including a discussion of its corporate culture and a description of the audience that would view the video. The students had to develop a concept for carrying out these objectives; they did not have to write a script. The focus was to block out the general visual and verbal ideas that could later be developed into a fullblown script. The assignments were due at the next class period, one week later. Students discussed their solutions to the problem, then viewed the actual video presentation the company had developed to introduce its marketing team.

Two weeks later, students were given another take-home assignment to write a full script for a 90-second video news release, after a lecture on the process of writing VNRs and viewing four actual VNRS. They were given the background information on which to base their VNR. In addition to writing the script, including a description of the video portion, they had to suggest what they would have on a B-roll to offer television stations. After students handed in their assignments, they saw the company's actual finished version of the VNR in class, as well as news clips from a number of television stations so, they could see how the stations actually used the VNR. The exercise gave students the opportunity to put together words and visuals to form a cohesive message and to see an end product of such a process.

## **Overview of the corporate video field**

The class also gave students an overview of how video was used by organizations to communicate with their publics, both internal and external.

Two panel discussions were incorporated into the class schedule. One panel featured area freelancers who worked in the corporate video market. Students heard about and viewed projects that the freelancers had worked on. The other panel included B.W. Co. staff members who had used the corporate video department to help them solve a communication problem.

Each student also visited an organization within the area that had a corporate video department. Through interviews with people within the company's department, each student wrote a brief report about the company and its use of video to communicate. Students also made 10-minute presentations in class.

## **Producing a PSA**

Beginning with the fifth week of class, students learned how a video was put together, from the problem solving stage, where a communication need is discussed with a client, including how video can help fill that need, to the actual production process, including developing a concept, writing a script, turning the visual ideas into a workable format, blocking the shots, working with camera and sound people, doing a rough edit, and overseeing the final edit of the piece.

When the course was being developed, we wanted to be certain the students would have the opportunity to produce a video. We decided that a public service announcement would serve that purpose best for the following reasons: a 30-second format would require the same process that any other video piece would in terms of structure and execution; because of its short length, students could finish the project within a semester; and a large pool of non-profit clients in the area could benefit from having a PSA produced for them at little or no cost.<sup>2</sup>

The 15 students were divided into three project teams.<sup>3</sup> Each team was assigned a client who had been

solicited before the beginning of the semester. Team members were asked to discuss among themselves which position they would like to fill on the team, based on their interests and what they considered to be their strengths: director, producer, client liaison,<sup>4</sup> or script writer. Each team member was in charge of his/her particular assigned position, but all group members were to assist each other if needed. Each team was supervised by an instructor.

Like other teachers, we felt there were major advantages to using the team approach to learning, including the opportunity to learn to work together, much as in a real work situation; group thinking to solve a problem and the development of a better "product," (Jolliffe, 1991; Harris and Lipschultz, 1990; Halio, 1990; Trimbur, 1989).

Students met with their clients during the sixth week of class to collect background information on the client's organization and to discuss the client's communication needs. Students sent a follow-up letter to clients after the initial meeting to confirm what had been discussed in terms of the client's needs and the basic concept of the PSA's message.

The PSA's basic concept and carrying out that message began as a group process. Two script writers developed a script draft after discussion with group member, which the group finalized. The group also developed a story board, an essential step in the process (Dondis, 1973). The client liaison then met with the client to get script and story board approval. After getting approval, the group met with an editor from Burroughs Wellcome's corporate video staff to see if the video portion of the PSA was feasible. Most of the groups wanted to incorporate some special effects into their PSAs; the meeting with the editors proved invaluable in pinpointing any potential trouble spots for the post-production period. If any major changes in the video portion were suggested, the client liaison met with the client again to get final approval.

The producer, with assistance from other group members, got together any talent and props needed for the PSA and, along with the director, worked out shooting locations. The groups had to arrange their shoots during the tenth and eleventh week of class. They were provided a camera person and a light and sound person for the shoots. After the shooting was completed, groups were given a rough numbered tape of all their video. They marked out which shots they wanted to use in their final piece. Groups then scheduled a final edit at B.W. Co.'s editing labs; students directed the editing, which was done by a staff editor.

The student groups made formal presentations of their PSAs to the clients during the last class period. The teams gave a brief overview of the organization, its particular communication problem/opportunity for which the PSA was developed and a discussion of their solution. Then the PSA was viewed. Clients had the opportunity to comment on the PSA after the showing. Each client also was given six copies of the PSA and instructions on how to contact television stations to air the piece.

Clients have included a local chapter of the Audubon Society, the Orange County United Way, the Durham County Health Department and the North Carolina School for Science and Math.

## **Outcomes of the Class**

The course has been taught four times, and student satisfaction has been high. From a practical standpoint, students say they feel the course has given them a good hands-on learning experience. Students also have a tape that they can include in their portfolio when interviewing for a job. Conceptually, the course has broadened the students' knowledge about and understanding of visual media.

Students said they found the time spent with the technical people--the camera crew and editors--to be enlightening. They enjoyed seeing their ideas turned into a polished, finished product. Perhaps the biggest surprise to students was the number of hours that went into production and post-production to turn out just 30 seconds worth of videotape. The first time the course was taught, some students complained that the editing time was too compressed, leaving little margin for error. Post-production work has now been pushed back a week, giving each group more time in the editing tab. However, the greatest scheduling constraint is that company projects must take precedence over student work. If something unexpected happens that requires the services of the corporate video staff, work with students must be postponed. To date, students and company staff have been able to iron out scheduling problems.

Client satisfaction with the video projects also has been high. Of the 13 PSAs produced to date, all have played on television stations in North Carolina. Clients stated that they felt that having some control over the process during the formative stage was beneficial and led to a better product. Quality of the PSAs has been excellent; one PSA received a communication award from an area public relations organization.

The company also has seen benefits. It has continued its community service to area non-profit organizations by providing *pro bono* assistance within the corporate video communication class. The technical staff at the company has commented positively on its interaction with students. One editor commented that it gave him a chance to see more than one approach to editing a piece, because the students, who did not have a certain mindset, thought only about the possibilities of video, not potential physical or technical limitations.

Students have also had exposure to working with groups of lay people who have, in some cases, rigid ideas about what they want to see in a PSA about their organization. It has taken skill and patience to produce a PSA with a message and image on which everyone can agree.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The course is now team-taught by one professor and the manager of corporate video communication at B.W. Co. Now that the course's basic structure is in place, the need for three people to teach the course has diminished.

<sup>2</sup> Non-profit organizations currently pay \$300 to have a PSA produced by the class. This covers the cost of having the tape closed-captioned and six copies of the tape made. The money goes to Burroughs Wellcome.

<sup>3</sup> The course was taught once with four teams, but that proved to be too ambitious, given the manpower needs and the logistical problems of scheduling shoots and using editing labs at the company. The ideal size and number of teams seems to be three teams of five members each.

<sup>4</sup> The first time the class was taught, teams did not have one formally identified client liaison. It became obvious that it would be more efficient and less stressful to have only one person on the team serve as the contact between the team and the client, with the exception of the first meeting and final presentations. The client had a readily identifiable contact; the group had less of a scheduling problem trying to set up meetings.

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