



# Teaching Public Relations

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## Using a Real-Life Problem in an Introductory Public Relations Course

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**F**or a number of reasons I prefer to look outside the class-room to find problems for my students.

One, I know that completed problems can form the raw material for a fraternity or sorority's database. That's reason enough not to repeat static problems found at the end of the chapter.

Two, real problems permit a more realistic research phase. Students can search public databases and discover what others have written or said about the problem.

Third, students seem to become more involved with real problems.

But if our pedagogical sensibilities require more rigorous justification, we might follow Gibson's (1992-3) suggestion and look at educational outcomes. He lists five outcomes desirable for public relations education: a) attitudes, b) skills, c) knowledge, d) professional affiliation, and e) resume and portfolio.

Certainly no one problem or class can give our students a full measure of all these outcomes, but some teaching strategies may provide more and richer outcomes than others.

For that reason I want to share my experience with one outside problem that proved to be rich in at least four of the five outcomes for a recent introductory class.

This particular semester I assigned as the first problem the situation faced by Jackson, Michigan at finding itself named last among Money Magazine's list of best places to live in America. This simulation called for the students to counsel the leaders of Jackson, Michigan as to what all this meant, then provide options for action.

Students were to follow the four steps outlined in their text: research, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Individually they looked at selection criteria outlined in Money Magazine. I expected that this was going to be a lesson in the need to fix problems in the community before developing communication strategies. As it turned out, my students learned a good deal more than they or I anticipated.

We started in the usual way. Students used NEXIS to check the wires and published news stories and how they played in various parts of the country. Some called the local Jackson newspaper, the Jackson Chamber of Commerce, and the mayor's office in Jackson to learn first-hand how community leaders

viewed the situation.

In the past we have looked at Colonel Sanders' problem with a fat-conscious buying public, the cellular industry's response to allegations that-cellular phones cause brain tumors, a contro-versy associated with building a new airport on land Native Americans called sacred, and the continuing brouhaha posed by a live pigeon shoot at the annual town picnic in Heggins, Pennsylvania.

This case was different. This one added two ingredients the others lacked. One difference was a strong sense of curiosity by southern Michigan media as to why a school 600 miles away might be interested in their community. The second factor involved a student with the means to travel to Jackson to share his and his classmates' analysis and proposed solutions to the problem. Justin Hadley worked at Federal Express and was able to fly space-available to Detroit, about an hour away from Jackson.

An invitation from the Jackson Chamber of Commerce set the next phase of the story in motion. Chamber president Ila Smith agreed to accept the individual plans from the class and arranged a tour of the city for their visiting guest -- Justin Hadley. The tour included radio and TV interviews, visits with local dignitaries, and a luncheon with community leaders. Justin also visited the local prison. The prison was key to understanding Jackson's low ranking, since the crime associ-ated with the prison weighed heavily in the city's final ranking.

With Jackson media in place to cover the visit, the class wondered whether Memphis media might be interested in covering some aspect of Justin's visit. Without much difficulty the class arranged for Justin to do a live interview with a Memphis and Nashville radio DJ live from his remote location in Jackson. Unfortunately, those interviews fell through. But an Ann Arbor radio station spent about 20 minutes of live air time interviewing eight members of the class who remained in Memphis. They discussed their analysis and recommendations with their Michigan radio host.

With interest building, the University released a short fea-ture story to the Associated Press that was picked up by media in Michigan and Tennessee, including the local business jour-nal and two local TV stations. The Memphis NBC affiliate interviewed one of the students on campus and the Memphis CBS affiliate chatted with Justin and his instructor five for about five minutes on the evening news after he returned from Jackson.

## **Media Interest**

Requests for interviews were at first a curiosity, then an opportunity to explore why some events are newsworthy while others are not. Also, it allowed us to see how stories are developed, interpreted, and reported.

The Jackson Chamber of Commerce seized the opportunity to make the point that the city deserved better than last place. Actually, last in this case meant ranking number 300 among all cities and towns in the U.S. The 1990 World Almanac lists 5,338 communities in the U.S. with a population of 5,000 or greater. A listing of 300 would still put them in the top 6%.

Unfortunately, "last" is the word that sticks with most people. But last was both a problem and an opportunity for Jackson. Last meant that they got ink and air time to respond to the constant "How does it feel..." questions from the major media centers. They were already using every opportunity to make their case in the media. Class interest provided another oppor-tunity to push the point.

The day after the class project appeared as the lead story in the Jackson Citizen Patriot, the Detroit Free Press, the Detroit News, and several smaller communities picked up the story. That same day the story made page one in the University of Memphis campus newspaper -- The Helmsman. The students were

both pleased with the attention and puzzled by it. No story carried specifics about what the students proposed. In fact, after Justin's visit, we never heard from city officials about the value of the plans or whether the attention helped meet the objectives in Jackson's own public relations plan. This gave us a chance to ponder relationships at yet another level.

## **Educational Outcomes**

Let's return to Gibson's (1992-3) educational outcomes and judge how this assignment measured up. The first was to develop appropriate attitudes toward work and the practice of public relations. I make no scientific claims that attitudes improved as a result of the exercise. I can't prove it. There was no pre-test or post-test measurements to make such a claim.

Nevertheless, I observed an excited class, an engaged class, a class that believed it might have an impact on a real-life problem. We were able to refer to it as a "shared" experience, something we had in common for the rest of the semester. In retrospect, I also believe that it laid a solid foundation for later material. Students became more inquisitive; they seemed to be more receptive to the detail we added throughout the semester.

Gibson's (1992-3) second outcome is acquiring skills -communications skills, analytic skills, research skills, manage-ment skills. The introductory course is typically not a skills course as we understand the term in journalism and communi-cation studies. Nonetheless, by seeing a scenario played out in real time students do get to test their research and analytic skills. Particularly useful in a real problem is that students get to learn mistakes, make adjustments, and try again. In this case they learned something about what passes for news, and the routines of print and electronic media.

The third desired outcome is knowledge, especially, knowl-edge of "ethics, communication theory, persuasion, mass me-dia, public relations, social psychology, psychology, and busi-ness administration" (Gibson, 1992-3, p. 46). Here we learned about the life cycle of an issue. We saw first-hand the value of repetition when using the mass media.

Gibson (1992-3) lists affiliating with a professional organi-zation as the fourth desired outcome. Let's just say it is a "coincidence" that Justin joined PRSSA, became involved with the chapter, and was elected chapter president the following semester. No systematic effect is claimed for the other members of the class.

Finally, an important educational outcome should provide students with something to add to their resumes and portfolios. This class will have a wonderful story to tell when a potential employer asks "So, what did you learn in your PR classes?" Each has clips, of course, but none were based on a student's writing. Each has a plan for his or her portfolio with research, goals and objectives, options, and a strategy.

Justin, of course, benefited most. He's now an honorary citizen of Jackson. And, he has been involved in a project that provided real experience. Had it not been for his work situation and his interest in flying to Michigan to meet with community leaders, the assignment would still have been useful -- but the outcomes would have been less dramatic. It is an important lesson to see how the dynamics of a situation can change with a novel twist.

In this case, for one week, class imitated life. But there were no pat answers. There was discovery and understanding. I wish I could replicate that experience for my students every semester. Obviously that won't happen. But it could every now and then. That's why I continue to look for challenging real-world prob-lems. The potential for maximizing teaching outcomes is just too important and exciting to pass up.

## References

Gibson, D. C. (1992-3). ASK/PR: An outcome perspective on public relations education. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 37(4), 45-48.

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