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Using SPE Context Analysis in the Public Relations Campaigns Class

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To succeed in the workforce of the 21st century, public relations students need courses that prepare them for the realities of that workforce. The threat of public relations losing influence in the organizational hierarchy, opportunities for women to move into managerial positions, the increasingly diverse workforce, and growing international interactions are all part of the "real world" students will be entering. Educators can help students meet these challenges by offering courses that make clear the connection between the practitioner's communication activities and these larger concerns.

As Dozier and Broom (1995) have suggested, writing and disseminating messages are important activities, but they are not ends themselves. The value of this technical communication role is nestled within the managerial role. Hence, communication skills are necessary, but not sufficient. Moreover, Dozier and Broom (1995) surmised that according to the International Association of Business Communicator's (IABC) 1992 Excellence study, the "knowledge to enact the manager role was the single most powerful correlate of excellence in public relations and communication management" (p. 4).

In this article, I share how I have encouraged students at Western Carolina University to develop the communication skills they need to break into the profession, while simultaneously keeping managerial concerns at the forefront of their thinking. The theoretical framework undergirding this pedagogical perspective is the SPE (Social, Political, & Economic) Context as defined by Culbertson, Jeffers, Stone, and Terrell (1993). The social context deals with cultural beliefs; the political context with gaining support and with power relationships; and the economic context has to do with the distribution of resources. Obviously, there is much overlap in these three contexts (Culbertson et al., 1993).

The analysis of the larger social, political, and economic issues can help students put their communication activities in context. It is from this framework that a public relations campaign can become more than a publicity campaign.

The need for public relations professionals to solidify their roles as managers is pressing. As Lauzen (1992) reported, "encroachment," or the growing number of nonpublic relations professionals, like lawyers and marketers, assuming public relations management positions is increasingly occurring. Practitioners' positive attitudes toward and perceived competencies in the managerial role decrease the likelihood of encroachment, Lauzen concluded. To determine practitioners' abilities, Lauzen developed the Managerial Role Competencies Scale. One of the scale items specifically addresses whether

practitioners have tracked and synthesized social, political, technological, and/or economic trends (p. 73).

While there certainly are additional aspects of the managerial role that students need expertise in, exploring the social, political and economic dimensions, as outlined in the SPE Context model, is a step in the right direction.

During the spring semester of 1996, students in Western's CMPR 460: Public Relations Campaigns developed and implemented the following campaigns:

1. A campaign to promote awareness about the status of women in public relations;
2. A campaign to promote the University's Women's History Month;
3. A campaign to promote the University's International Festival.

My approach to teaching the campaigns class is what Kendall (1991) characterized as the "agency format with the class divided into noncompeting teams with real world clients" (p. 183). My role as instructor is to serve as an account manager, giving direction and support as needed. The expectation is that students will design, implement, and evaluate an actual campaign for the client.

In addition to the execution of the campaign, I stress the SPE Context. Depending on the client, one context may be more crucial than the others, but students are expected to consider all of the contexts, and, especially, how the contexts intertwine. Following are highlights of the communication activities and the implications of the SPE Context analysis for each of the campaigns. The campaign outlines are based on elements of Hunt and Grunig's (1994) and Kendall's (1996) guidelines.

Campaign 1: Raising Awareness about the Status of Women in Public Relations

The client for this campaign was the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) in general and Western's chapter, specifically. The goal was to develop a model campaign that other PRSSA chapters across the country could adopt. To develop the campaign the students did the following:

1) Situation analysis/publics. In this stage, the students identified the public relations problem and/or opportunity through secondary and primary research methods. A review of the literature indicated that although women constitute the majority of public relations practitioners, a disproportionately low percentage of women hold the top managerial and counseling positions, and, consequently, command smaller salaries. This phenomenon was first described as "the velvet ghetto" by Cline, Toth, Turk, Walters, Johnson, and Smith (1986).

More recently, Dozier and Broom's (1995) comparison of survey results from the same PRSA members in 1979 and 1991 suggested signs of progress. They reported that the percentage of female practitioners enacting the manager role was 39% in 1991, up from 28% in 1979. The difference in men's and women's salaries from 1979 to 1991, however, remained statistically significant (p. 17). While there is some welcome evidence to support the managerial gender gap may be narrowing, a critical finding in Toth and Grunig's (1993) study was that women may be being paid less for doing more. Although women reported "doing it all"--that is, executing both technical and managerial functions--they still earned less than their male counterparts.

The fact that approximately 80 percent of the students currently majoring in public relations are female (Cline, 1989) is both a problem and an opportunity. The problem is the potential for continued discrimination against women; the opportunity is for women to capitalize on the current situation in public relations. Evidence suggests that young women desire managerial responsibilities. In a survey of PRSA and IABC members, Toth and Cline (1991) reported that only 10.1 percent of the respondents

under 30 years of age agreed with the statement that "women prefer skills over management tasks in public relations" (pp. 169, 170).

The question, then, is how to address remaining barriers and help young women (and the profession) develop their full potential. A coordinated public relations campaign to raise awareness about women's status in public relations puts into action L. Grunig's (1993) recommendation to increase students' awareness of the discrimination they may face, as well as fostering women's leadership.

Although the students agreed that both male and female students needed information about gender issues, they decided to target the majority of their information to the young women entering the profession.

2) Objectives. The primary objective was to raise awareness about the status of women among public relations students at Western Carolina University and in the Southeast District of PRSSA.

3) Strategy & Tactics The students decided that the first step in achieving this outcome objective would be through a formal presentation entitled, "Cracking the glass ceiling in public relations: Yesterday, today, and tomorrow." The presentation highlighted the discrimination women have faced and the progress they've made, particularly in terms of roles and salaries, the stereotypes that devalue women, and recommendations for achieving managerial positions, based on the commandments of the 1986 Glass Ceiling Report. The tone of the presentation was to not ignore discrimination where it exists, but to focus on the opportunity for women in the field and the need for men and women to work together to make a difference. To publicize the campus presentation, they prepared fliers, press releases, and radio spots, and made announcements in classes. Additionally, they presented during the 1996 PRSSA Southeast District Conference.

4) Evaluation. After the presentations, the students administered a survey and solicited feedback to determine audience members' reactions to the presentation. The most prevalent comment from students was that they were surprised by the information, but perhaps more importantly, they wanted to know what they could do to make a difference in the area. Interpreting this finding in light of Grunig's situational theory of publics (Grunig and Hunt 1984) suggests that once students became aware of the problem (high problem recognition) and realized that the status of women impacted all professionals in public relations (high level of involvement) they became motivated to do something to change the situation (low constraint recognition), which led them to active communication behavior.

The SPE Context:

While the social, political, and economic contexts of this campaign can be clearly delineated, their interrelationship demonstrates the complexity and utility of the SPE Context analysis. As Culbertson et al. (1993) put it, "political contexts cannot be understood without a close look at social contacts that bear on who wields power and how" (p. 77).

The prominence of the power dimension in this campaign provided the opportunity to discuss feminist theory, particularly the liberal and radical orientations, and an opportunity to encourage non-dichotomous thinking. Radical and liberal feminists want essentially the same thing; at issue is the strategy to achieve the equitable society both want. The students heeded my call for non-dichotomous thinking and Hon's (1995) advice to combine both liberal and feminist strategies, which could provide a comprehensive framework for tackling gender inequities in public relations. Two of Hon's (1995) radical societal strategies the students believed they could address were raising levels of awareness about discrimination and breaking down gender stereotypes. As Hon (1995) concluded, "[i]nstitutional change is usually slow. Thus women need strategies for empowering themselves to battle discrimination" (p. 76). The liberal strategies the students recommended included advising women to avoid stereotypical behaviors, to be

seen as capable and promotable, and to participate in networking and mentoring activities.

The political power question in this campaign is inextricably linked to questions of economic power. Each context builds on the other. Some practitioners have expressed fears that the increasing number of women in public relations will result in a decrease in status and salary (e.g. Culbertson et al., 1993, p. 162). The issue of salary, then, is tied to the managerial question, to issues of systemic, societal discrimination, and to the future health of public relations as a profession.

As J. Grunig (1992) argued: "Organizations will lose the opportunity for their communication programs to contribute maximally to organizational effectiveness if they fail to promote women from the technician to the manager role and instead allow men from other fields to encroach upon communication management roles without proper training or experience" (pp. 21, 22).

The SPE context analysis provides an excellent framework for exploring the larger context that should be taken into consideration when developing communication strategies to address the issue of women's status in public relations.

Campaign 2: Women's History Month

Situation analysis/publics: March 1996 marked the third year that Western's public relations students had been involved in the promotion of Women's History Month on campus. The students were responsible for organizing the kick-off event, "A Walk for Women," as well as promoting the 20 events and activities constituting the month's calendar. They identified three priority publics: students, faculty and staff, and community members for the campaign.

Objectives: The students set both process and outcome objectives. The process objectives were publicity-related, e.g. they wanted to increase the amount of publicity from last year's count. Recognizing that publicity is a means to an end and not the end itself, the students also set attendance-related outcomes objectives. A primary goal was to increase the number of people attending the kick-off event, the "Second Annual Walk for Women," from 300 to 500 people.

Strategy & Tactics: Since the goal was to increase the amount of coverage of Women's History month events in channels reaching their three primary publics, the students sent press releases and PSA's to the campus newspaper and radio station. The University's Office of Public Information (OPI) agreed to devote the front page of its bi-monthly faculty and staff newsletter to the month's events, and to issue all press releases about the month's activities to the community and regional media. In effect, the students became an arm of OPI. The campus and community also were saturated with banners, fliers, and posters publicizing the month's activities.

Evaluation: The campaign fell short of achieving one of its primary objectives: increasing attendance to the Walk for Women from 300 to 500; 350 attended. Unforeseen circumstances interfered with this goal as classes were unexpectedly canceled the morning of the walk. We believe that attendance was as high as it was because prospective walk participants had been asked to sign a "Walk Commitment Sheet," pledging their support. Though frustrating for the students, the last minute cancellation of morning classes was a wonderful lesson. There are many things the public relations person has little to no control over and the students had to respond as best they could. It also demonstrated the importance of interpersonal communication contacts--above and beyond media contacts--in securing support.

The SPE Context:

The social context for the Women's History campaign was similar to the PRSSA campaign. The neglect

for women's achievements in history has been well documented; however, the philosophical debate about how best to redress these oversights continues. To avoid the divisiveness sometimes associated with feminism, the students addressed what Culbertson et al. (1993) defined as the "coorientation processes" dimension of the social context, which deals with the number of social contacts (p. 282). In their publicity promoting the "Walk for Women," the students emphasized that it was an opportunity for "both men and women faculty and students to demonstrate their support of women's issues." The publicity photo showed both men and women making preparations for the walk. They also reached out to groups not commonly associated with feminism--sororities and fraternities--with surprising success.

While the students clearly saw themselves in an activist role, another dimension of the political context was more educational: the analysis of the institutional commitment to the women's studies program. Organized as an interdisciplinary program, Western's program is supported by faculty teaching in departments across the University. It is headed by a volunteer coordinator, who donates her time as university "service."

Prior to 1996, promotions had been done on a shoestring. Fliers and calendars were copied, banners were done with paint on sheets, and the only professional promotional piece was a brochure. However, a windfall occurred in the Spring of 1996: \$2,000 was allotted specifically to the promotion of Women's History Month. Having institutional commitment to the program in terms of real dollars made a tremendous impact on the quality of the campaign the students were able to conduct. In their public presentation at the end of the semester, the students emphasized the political and economic importance of the institution's commitment to the program on the public relations programming.

Since the 1996 campaign, Western's commitment to the women's studies program seems to be solidifying. At the beginning of the fall 1996 semester the University announced the establishment of a \$250,000 endowment, a portion of which would support the women's studies program. And at the beginning of the spring 1997 semester, the volunteer coordinator was asked to forward a proposal outlining the responsibilities of a paid coordinator.

While there is no way to determine whether these developments would have occurred without the concerted efforts of the PR students, it is certain that their role in increasing the program's visibility on campus did not hurt. Additionally, the number of students enrolling in women's studies courses continues to grow. The students see these developments and understand the power of public relations' impact on organizational decisions in tangible ways.

Campaign 3: The International Festival & Club

Situation analysis/publics: During Western's annual International Festival, students from the various countries represented on campus share their culture with the university and surrounding community. Sponsored by the Office of Student Development and The International Student Club, the festival features food, information booths, musical performances, skits and other artistic demonstrations.

Objectives: Since there had been no attempt to record attendance at past festivals, it was difficult to set a realistic attendance record. Setting this objective was made virtually impossible when the decision was made to move the festival outside, which meant that there would be numerous entry points from areas all across campus. The students set the process objective of increased publicity, which was easily measured, and the outcome objective of increased awareness about the International Student Club and its activities.

Strategy & Tactics: Because the PR students knew that they needed ample time to publicize activities, they were successful in encouraging the International Student Club members to act quickly on scheduling decisions. The International Student Club advisor indicated that without the public relations students

pushing for decisions to be made, less would have been accomplished. This comment highlights the students' advising and problem-solving roles.

The students worked directly with the campus newspaper and radio station and also with OPI to issue releases regionally. They wrote a series of feature articles about students from the countries with the largest contingent of students on campus. Western's faculty and staff newsletter devoted the front page of one of its issues to the Festival. The students also designed and published a calendar of the festival's activities and ordered professionally-designed signs to be posted throughout campus.

Evaluation: Since there were few benchmarks available because this was the first time the public relations students had been involved in the promotion of the festival, the evaluation centered on publicity counts and staff feedback. The amount of publicity more than doubled and there was a steady stream of individuals at the festival all day. Since the festival was outside for the first time, it is difficult to determine whether the increased publicity brought people out or the high visibility of the festival outdoors on one of the sunniest days of the year explains the high attendance. No formal surveys were administered and the students recognized this as a missed opportunity.

While the increased publicity and the overall organization of the festival were successes, these were not the most important learning experiences for the public relations students. In fact, not everything went smoothly. This is where they learned their most important lessons and this is where analysis of the SPE Context becomes most insightful, particularly the cultural dimension of the social context.

SPE Context:

According to Culbertson (et al.), the social context becomes "especially crucial in cross-cultural communication, because obviously people of different cultures have different and often conflicting perspectives. Failure to understand and take these factors into account can wreak havoc in public relations efforts" (p. 56). Cultural differences definitely became a factor in this campaign as a short-lived leadership struggle developed between the International Student Club leaders and the PR students. While conflicts can and do occur among American students, the cultural differences in this scenario made resolution more difficult. The International Club leaders' cultural values encouraged them to avoid open conflict, while the American PR students wanted to "deal with" the conflict. In the end, the students achieved an excellent working relationship, but not without a concerted effort to understand each other's culturally-influenced behaviors. Conceptualizing these competing beliefs on a cultural continuum helped put the conflict in perspective. Not only did the PR students learn about other cultures, they learned about themselves and their own tendencies toward ethnocentrism.

The political context for the International campaign was a positive one. The students saw how their public relations efforts were clearly supporting larger institutional goals. Western's commitment to international issues is evidenced by its call to "internationalize the curriculum" and its recent administrative reorganization of its international programs. This impacts the economic context through a reallocation of funds and, ideally, through increased enrollments of international students. Had the analysis of this campaign stopped at the evaluation stage, the students and I could have missed the "real" lessons of this educational experience.

Pedagogical Perspective:

The combination of the real world client approach and the SPE Context analysis provides public relations students an opportunity to develop both managerial and practical communication expertise. Meeting deadlines, working with printers, scheduling facilities, handling group conflicts, and standing before their peers as professional persuaders, are all skills students will need early in their careers. Obviously,

students spent the majority of their time in communication activities. It is unrealistic to think that students could fulfill the managerial function at this stage in their careers. But attention to the SPE Context analysis forced them to consider the connection between communication and managerial concerns. This provides an important professional development bridge.

Public relations is more than publicity and the teaching of communication skills should not be divorced from the larger social, political, and economic contexts. Students should find themselves asking why a press release is needed and what impact specific communications are having. When communication is put in context, public relations students--both male and female--will be ready to assume their rightful place at the top of the organizational hierarchy in the 21st century.

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