

Teaching Public Relations

Management by Objectives: An Effective Tool for Measuring the Success of Public Relations Classroom Projects

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As educators, we are constantly searching for innovative ways to encourage students enrolled in undergraduate public relations programs to take the theories and principles they have learned from lectures and textbooks and apply them to "real world" situations. So case study analyses, "what if" situations, even actual client work is incorporated into the curriculum. While these activities provide students strong technical experience, they generally don't provide the exercises necessary to strengthen critical thinking, strategic planning, decision making and analytical thinking skills so critical to effective management. Since the manager conceptualizes and directs public relations programs and the technician carries out technical services (Grunig), undergraduate public relations education should attempt to strike a balance between teaching skills that will benefit the future technician and the manager.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

With the commitment to allow students to sharpen their strategic planning skills, a class titled Public Relations Event Management was designed. The course evolved as a result of research revealing that event management ranked second among a list of 47 tasks students were responsible for completing during their internships (Bourland, Fulmer, Graham).

The event management class was designed to respond to a need in the public relations curriculum, but the pedagogy was handled in a different manner than the traditional lecture and test-taking format. Class members were responsible for planning a cam-

pus-wide special event in order to raise funds for two clients: the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA)-GSU Chapter and the Communication Arts Department. The event, "Leap of Fate," was similar to the bachelor/bachelorette bids conducted throughout the 1980s. A silent auction of donated items also was included in the program. The students' assignment was to incorporate management principles into the well-known public relations strategic planning process (research, action planning, communication and evaluation) while coordinating the special event via their class.

Methods for evaluating the Event Management class combined traditional evaluation tools with authentic assessment, a new type of evaluation technique evolving on campuses across the country (McDaniel). Authentic assessment examines student performance based on worthy intellectual tasks and measures how well students successfully complete "real world" projects being assigned in the classroom. Five methods were used to measure the class's success.

1) Management by Objectives: Before the students developed event objectives, they determined the specifics of the event by conducting pre-campaign research including a background and situational analysis, a statement of problem/opportunity, and identification of key target audiences. All of this information was included in the event proposal, which was reviewed and approved by the Academic Administration at Georgia Southern University. The students then moved into the planning phase of the event, which included establishing goals, objectives,

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strategies, and tactics, and determining key publics. The objectives covered determining attendance, revenue and expenses, and media coverage. Upon termination of the event, the students were responsible for writing an in-depth follow-up report which was submitted to PRSSA so the organization could determine what needed to be done to refine the event.

2) Student evaluations and follow-up reports: Class members were responsible for evaluating the class at the end of the term, like they do every quarter. Areas of evaluation included specific techniques practiced by the instructor, as well as the overall content and format of the class. In addition to filling in the standardized form, students had an opportunity to make personal comments, some of which are included in the findings.

3) Participant evaluations: The students designed evaluations for distribution to event participants. These evaluations included a five-point scale to critique various facets of the event, ranging from the diversity of date packages to decorations of the ballroom and professionalism of the event coordinators.

4) Peer evaluations: GSU's Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) Chapter submitted the "Leap of Fate" proposal for a regional competition among 25 other PRSSA chapters throughout the Southeast District. The chapter won first place for Most Outstanding Special Event/Program at the 1996 PRSSA Southeast District Conference in Atlanta. Judging criteria employed by the Southeast District PRSSA executive board members included implementation of various public relations strategies, principles, and tactics; utilization of volunteers; creativity; organization; and overall design of the program.

Focus-group interview: A focus group interview was conducted with seven students from the event management class. Questions focused specifically on the format and structure of the class, rather than focusing on how the event was designed.

RESULTS OF THE FIVE MEASUREMENT TOOLS

Progress toward objectives, mostly quantitative in nature, was easy to determine. Students projected a crowd of 500 attendees; 325 attended the event. However, approximately 400 tickets were sold. Therefore, when calculating in the 75 "no shows," the event fell short by only 20% (100 people) of its projected numbers. Media placement also was successful. The students earned feature-story coverage in all of the newspapers receiving their press release, including the community paper and both campus papers. They received television coverage on the NBC affiliate and the local cable network and were represented on three

different occasions on a campus radio station talk show. Budget calculations were realistic in nature. In reference to revenue, the students raised \$53 over their projections. Regarding expenses, they spent \$2.77 more than they had budgeted. The students were pleased to report that they netted \$1721 (\$53 more than they had anticipated) on a zero-based budget with no working capital to get them started.

Student evaluations and follow-up reports unveiled several recurring themes. First, students believed the overall employer/employee and employee/client relationship and office setting of the class worked well. They liked being put into committees and knowing they would be held accountable for all the duties pertaining to their specific committee areas. The students also liked having to turn in weekly progress reports which were disseminated among the other committees, citing two reasons: 1) They respected the fact that they had to be held accountable each week for tasks they were responsible for completing, and 2) Sharing what they were doing via these reports enhanced the communication among the 23 students. This mechanism also curtailed the overlapping of projects and aided in the overall continuity of the team. Finally, the students repeatedly expressed how much they enjoyed being able to apply management principles they had learned in their public relations courses. These principles included creating budgets, establishing project timelines and deadlines, and developing business relationships with vendors, administrators, and the media.

Eighty event attendees completed participant evaluations. Comments from the evaluation forms indicated that participants' favorite activities were the mystery date extravaganza and the silent auction. Participants also were asked to critique five facets of the event via a 5-point scale (1=poor and 5=excellent). These elements included the silent auction, the mystery date extravaganza, professionalism of the staff and volunteers, overall organization of the event, and equal student body representation of mystery date participants. Scores in each area averaged 4.5.

Peer evaluations by PRSSA's Southeast District executive board members resulting in the class's event winning the Most Outstanding Special Event/Program competition, indicating the event was worthy of commendation. This peer judging exposed students to yet another "real world" evaluation technique. Further, the judges served as another set of objective outside critics. Their points-of-view offered another evaluation perspective because they were judging the event based only on the written materials and print collaterals submitted for the competition, as opposed to the peer evaluators who actually attended the event and placed more emphasis on performance.

The last method used to measure the effectiveness of applying management principles in the classroom was a focus group interview. The seven students who participated offered valuable constructive criticism regarding the structure and format of the class. Four questions were asked:

- What worked effectively regarding the organizational structure and format of the class? Why?
- What didn't work effectively? Why?
- What motivated you to succeed?
- What public relations management principles were evident during the planning of your special event?

Overall, the students reported they liked the design of the employer/employee and employee/client relationships that were immediately established, the requirement of weekly individual and committee progress reports, the implementation of crisis planning "what if" exercises, the focus on actual planning and event results versus textbook test-taking exercises, the opportunity to engage in hands-on management activities, and the democracy of the group's culture allowing everyone in the class to have a say in the various aspects of the event-planning procedures. In most classes, the predominate motivator is the end-of-term student grade. According to this focus group, that was not the case in the Event Management class. Students reported six different reasons why they were motivated:

- The success of the event and its end result was the most important motivating factor.
- Being able to achieve industry experience in a classroom setting was a motivator.
- Being responsible for an entire campus-wide fundraiser motivated the students to succeed because their reputation was at stake with their peers and with professors and administrators throughout the university.
- The initial challenge from the administration (i.e., having these superiors tell them they couldn't host the event for "political reasons") challenged the students to want to do it even more and to produce an even more successful event. "We just didn't want to quit. So we set certain standards and we set them high," one student commented.
- The students liked the closeness they established during this class, due to the nature of its structure. Exceptional attendance supports the premise that students were highly motivated to participate in the class assignment. Nearly half of the class had perfect attendance and another quarter of the class only missed one session, and the rest missed only two classes over a 10-week period.
- Students were motivated by the management princi-

ples themselves, specifically stating that they were motivated because they realized that, through the successful coordination of this event, they were actually acquiring critical management skills.

Some problems were uncovered by the interview. One issue addressed by the students was that there were too many people with "strong" personalities in the class who tried to take over the entire event. One student stated: "There were too many leaders and not enough followers." Others said the size of the class caused chaos; they preferred 18-20 to the 23 enrolled. Some students complained that deadlines weren't met. However, they pointed out that this was a "real world" problem and that the "slackers" helped them develop ways to handle these situations when they arise. A final issue the students discussed revolved around the time and day the class was offered. They agreed that only meeting on Mondays and Wednesdays created a gap because the students didn't collectively meet again for five days. However, the students said they curtailed the problem by proactively communicating with each other and the instructor via telephone and separate mini-planning meetings.

THREE OUTCOMES EVOLVE

The data revealed three outcomes. First, this research demonstrated that motivational factors, which are a key part of the leading management function, played a prevalent role in encouraging students to apply public relations theories, principles, strategies and tactics. Therefore, their critical-thinking skills were enhanced.

Second, the measurement tool used to assess the students' performance stimulated them to do well. Knowing they were being critiqued not only by their instructor but also by their peers, other professors, and campus administrators inspired them to do the best they could and to produce the finest event of which they were capable.

Finally, it was evident that the management principles themselves motivated students to learn and to produce a successful event. The most prevalent management concepts cited by the students were strategic planning, networking, total quality management, empowerment, synergy, and leadership.

MANAGEMENT BY OBJECTIVES ENCOURAGES LEARNING

Combining basic management principles with public relations communication management principles in a project-based public relations course can enhance stu-

dents' levels of motivation and, in turn, may increase the productivity and quality of their work. Additionally, when encouraged to utilize these management principles, students demonstrate higher-order critical-thinking skills which will serve them well upon graduation regardless of the career they pursue.

Public relations practitioners and educators continue to boast that public relations is a management function. Therefore, public relations professors must continually seek resourceful and creative ways to incorporate management principles into the public relations curriculum. As the millennium approaches, managing information will become increasingly more technical for tomorrow's public relations practitioner. It is up to educators to work collaboratively with industry professionals to provide students with the essential tools to become effective communication managers.

This study represents only one instance of academic assessment via project work. The area of authentic assessment research in higher education especially in public relations is virtually untapped. As with any study, repetition can help to validate or disprove these results. Future studies on project-based classes will allow for more refining and restructuring. Fine-tuning these management classes provides a win-win situation for everyone. We matriculate public relations students who possess the necessary tools to succeed; students enter the workforce with communication manager as well as communication technician skills; and the industry continues to flourish with proactive public relations professionals who are able to serve well the organizations they represent.

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