

# TEACHING PUBLIC RELATIONS

## Using New Technologies in Public Relations Curricula

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If the concept of integrating communications "is here to stay" (Wilcox, Ault, Agee and Cameron, 2000, p. 19), how can the next generation of public relations practitioners be educated to work in an environment that has most often been viewed as the domain of advertising and marketing?

The debate surrounding the proposed integration of public relations with advertising and marketing has been well documented. However, Griffin and Pasadeos (1998) concluded that "change is here and the communication functions are becoming more integrated" (p. 7). The report of a task force on integrated communications (Duncan, Caywood and Newsom, 1993) stated that those entering the fields of public relations and advertising in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should build stronger relationships between themselves and with marketing. The report concluded that "...advertising and public relations students must be offered a more conceptually unified and integrated program of communication study" (p. 1).

During the mid-1990s, data gathered from alumni employment surveys of a mid-western university's graduates showed that most public relations and advertising alumni were finding entry-level jobs in small markets. Anecdotal feedback from alumni showed that many often found themselves in positions that called for the integration of communication skills, as well as marketing knowledge and skills, that they were lacking. This evidence was supported by Griffin and Pasadeos (1998) who found that both advertising and public relations educators in their study agreed that employers are demanding skills their programs had not covered.

Using the 1993 IMC task force report for guidance, a three-person team of advertising, public relations, and marketing professors at the mid-western university began to explore ways to develop closer ties between their disciplines. One result of this effort was the development of a senior-level IMC course to be offered as an elective in the public relations, advertising, and marketing programs.

### DESIGNING THE IMC COURSE

The primary goal of the new course was to create

among students an understanding of how public relations, advertising, and marketing interests should work together in the IMC process. The professors developed a course syllabus, which has undergone several changes as the team explored new ideas and learned from their experiences. Students enrolling in the class must have had introductory courses in marketing, and public relations or advertising, and be at least a junior. In reality, most students come into the class after completing several of their major discipline courses. The "Integrated Marketing Communications" course is cross-listed in the advertising, public relations, and marketing sequences.

Various teaching methods were explored, including team teaching. As only one professor could count the course in his/her teaching load for the semester, it was agreed that the three would rotate the course, counting it as a part of each professor's teaching load every third year. The other two would volunteer to make "guest lectures" in the course.

It was decided that the public relations professor on the team (the author of this paper) would teach the initial class offering in Spring, 1997. The following spring the advertising professor taught the class. While the marketing professor was willing to take her turn at teaching the class, she has not been able to work it into her schedule. Other problems with the planned rotation occurred when the public relations professor was promoted to Assistant Chair of the Department of Communications and was given a teaching load reduction. Therefore, he has been unable to work the course back into his schedule. The advertising professor has agreed to continue teaching the course until his two colleagues (or other qualified professors in public relations and marketing) can work the course into their schedules.

Although the advertising professor has taken the lead role in teaching the course, the public relations and marketing professors have continued to provide classroom input from their respective areas. The three also serve as resource persons for the students as they develop the IMC plans.

At the time the course was first offered, few textbooks

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on integrated communications were available for consideration of adoption in an undergraduate course of this nature. Although several have since been published, the professors have determined that no single text presented material in the manner that they needed. One major weakness in most of the textbooks reviewed was what was considered to be an inadequate presentation on the role of public relations from a broad perspective as well as its role in the marketing process. Therefore, the professors draw upon their professional experiences and other resources for classroom presentations. Students are referred to other resources that help them develop a better understanding of the process. Books and journals are available in the department's Scripps Howard Center for Media Studies, and web sites are identified for students to explore.

### STRESSING THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

One concern of the public relations professor has been to ensure that all of the students in the IMC course, regardless of their academic backgrounds, understand the contributions that public relations makes to organizational management as well as to the marketing process. Realizing the debate that existed in the public relations field concerning IMC, this course has embraced Harris' concept that both corporate public relations and marketing public relations (1993) are needed in modern businesses.

First, the "holistic" concept of public relations is emphasized. The focus is on the role of public relations as a management function, telling an organization's story to its target publics to foster good will and understanding, generating feedback, and counseling top management on public opinion and its implications.

The public relations professor stresses that public relations practitioners should be able to assist top management in solving business problems, participate in strategic planning, and help influence what companies are doing. Traditional functions of public relations—counseling management, public opinion research, media relations, publicity, employee relations, community relations, public affairs, issues management, crisis communications, and financial relations—are all presented. These topics serve as a review for the public relations majors who are exposed to these concepts in several of the courses they take, but are new for most of the other students in the class.

Once the broader role of public relations is established, attention turns to the function of "marketing communications." Harris (1993) emphasized that as support for marketing, public relations helps to raise awareness, to inform and educate target audiences, to gain understanding, to build trust, and to create a climate of acceptance by consumers. Cases are used to demonstrate how public relations is effectively used to support both organizational and marketing objectives.

### STRUCTURE OF THE IMC COURSE

The 15-week course begins with an overview and introduction of the IMC concept and relationship marketing

by the lead instructor. The topics then move into marketing concepts with an emphasis on the marketing communication process. Sessions on personal selling, advertising, promotions, special events, public relations, and direct marketing are divided among the three professors as to their areas of expertise. The two guest lecturers each spend two weeks going over their areas with the class.

Whenever possible, guest speakers from local businesses, not-for-profit organizations, advertising agencies, and public relations firms are brought in to share how IMC works in their environments. Students are referred to a number of web sites of public relations firms, advertising agencies, and corporations to gather information about practical applications of integrated communications.

In the third week of the course, students are selected at random from each discipline and placed into teams of six to begin preparing an IMC campaign plan book for clients in local or area businesses. (The class is capped at 30 students.) The students then arrange meetings with their clients to gain an understanding of the challenges that need to be addressed. The work is conducted "pro bono" for the clients as the projects are considered by the faculty to be learning experiences for the students.

A regional hospital, entertainment businesses, a recreational facility, and fast-food businesses are among the clients that have been served by the classes. The professors use a system whereby two "IMC teams" independently develop campaigns for each client, generating a competitive environment in the class. Initial evidence from the quality of the IMC plans supports the belief of the professors that the students tend to try harder to outperform the competing team. The professors, however, do not attempt to rank either campaign as "first" or "second"; instead, each campaign is graded on its individual merits toward meeting goals of the class.

Grades are based on two exams (100 points each), the project (200 points), and peer evaluations from team members (100 points). The first exam is given about four weeks into the course on the first half of the material, and the second is given approximately three weeks later. Exam questions are provided by each professor for his/her presentations and each professor grades his/her questions. Once the examinations are over, students can then concentrate on developing their IMC plans. Students meet during regularly scheduled class times (as well as outside of class) and receive guidance from their professors.

The format of the IMC campaign plan includes: Situation Analysis/SWOT Analysis, Developing Strategy (including marketing goals and objectives, target markets, themes and messages, tactics, etc.), Budgeting; and the "IMC" objectives, strategy and tactics, and evaluation for the Personal Selling, Promotions, Special Events, Public Relations, Direct Marketing, and Advertising elements that are used in the campaign plan (both advertising and public relations elements are requirements). The plan book must contain a detailed campaign outline, together with appropriate examples for each communications element chosen to meet organizational objectives.

In addition to using "marketing public relations," students are expected to include broader "corporate public relations" tactics in their plans. Some clients require attention to employee relations, community relations, media relations or other public relations strategies to help achieve organizational objectives.

During the last week of class, the students make presentations and present the IMC campaign plan books to the clients in class. Each student receives peer evaluations from their team members for their individual contributions to the project. The evaluation becomes a part of their grade. The three professors individually evaluate the campaign plan books and determine an appropriate grade for the project.

### DISCUSSION

Developing and teaching the IMC class has not been without its problems. The three professors have experienced some difficulties with the integration of their presentations into one smooth-flowing course. Students, in their course evaluations at the end of the semester, have said that often the transition from one instructor's topic to the next was unclear. The faculty team continues to work to improve coordination of their presentations to the class. This is done through meetings to discuss strengths and weaknesses of the course at the end of the semester.

Another problem encountered in the first classes was inadequate time in the 15-week semester to develop an adequate IMC plan. Students in the earlier classes did not feel that they had enough time to prepare the plan as required by the instructors. Lecture and classroom presentations have now been compacted into approximately seven weeks, allowing eight weeks for students to concentrate on developing and writing their plans.

**RESOURCES:** To address the problem with not using a textbook for the course, the professors have turned to a variety of resources for the class. *Advertising Age*, *Public Relations Tactics*, *The Public Relations Strategist*, *Communication World* and *PR Week* regularly have articles of interest for this course. Other recommended resources include:

### BOOKS

- Belch, G. E. and Belch, M. A. (1998). *Advertising and Promotion*. New York: Irwin McGraw-Hill.
- Burnett, J. and Moriarty, S. (1998). *Introduction to Marketing Communications: An Integrated Approach*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Caywood, C. L. (1997). *The Handbook of Strategic Public Relations & Integrated Communications*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Gronstedt, A. (2000). *The Customer Century: Lessons from world-class companies in integrated marketing and communications*. New York: Routledge.
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### JOURNAL ARTICLES AND PAPERS

- Caywood, C. and Ewing, R. (1991). Integrated marketing communications: A new master's degree concept. *Public Relations Review*, 17 (3) 237-244.
- Copulsky, J. R. and Wolf, M. J. (1990 July/August). Relationship Marketing: Positioning for the Future. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 16-20.
- Eppes, T. (1996). The truth about public relations' leadership role in relationship marketing. Paper presented to Public Relations Society of America Workshop, St. Louis.
- Griffin, W. G., and Pasadeos, Y. (1998 Summer). The impact of IMC on advertising and public relations education. *Journalism Educator*, 53 (2).
- Harris, T. L. (1993, Summer). How MRP adds value to integrated marketing communications. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 13-18.
- Kendall, R. (1994 Summer). Beyond "Integrated Marketing Communication." *pr educator*.
- Lauzen, M. (1991, Fall). Imperialism and encroachment in public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 17, 245-256.
- Miller, D., and Rose, P. (1994 Spring). Integrated Communications: a look at reality instead of theory. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 14.
- Meiser, R. (1998). The Interdisciplinary Debate over IMC: Implications for PR practitioners, scholars and educators. Paper presented to Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, Baltimore.
- Staff. (1993, Winter). Educators reject IMC task force proposals; Charge report based on "spurious consensus." *pr educator*.
- Staff (1998, November 16). Furby delivers holiday cheer. *PR Week*, 31.
- Rose, P., and Miller, D. (1993 Spring). Integrated communications and practitioners' perceived needs. *Journalism Educator*, 48 (1).

### INTERNET SITES

- <http://www.com/goodwill/marketing.html> "Integrated Marketing and the Goodwill Games; <http://www.hillandknowlton.com> Hill and Knowlton Corporate Communications; <http://www.brouillard.com> Brouillard Communications; <http://www.richartz-fliss.com> Richartz & Fliss Inc.; <http://www.mcdadv.com> McDougall Associates; <http://www.codymontana.com> Cody Montana Integrated; <http://www.delfino.com> Delfino Marketing Communications;



<http://www.rkconnect.com/> Rhea and Kaiser Marketing Communications; <http://www.the-dma.org> Direct Marketing Association; <http://www.mosswarner.com> MossWarner Communications; <http://www.jdsouth.com> Jackson-Dawson Marketing Communications; <http://www.rkconnect.com> Rhea & Kaiser Marketing Communications; <http://www.hsr.com> Hensley Segal Rentschler - Integrated Marketing; <http://www.boxenbaumgrates.com> Boxenbaum Grate; <http://www.heywardrigby.co.uk> Heyward Rigby Communications; <http://www.quarry.com> Quarry Integrated Communications; <http://www.cormark.com> Cormark Communications Inc.; <http://www.westlawngraphic.com> West Lawn Graphic Communications; <http://www.bm.com> Burson-Marsteller; <http://edelman.com> Edelman Worldwide; <http://porternovelli.com> Porter/Novelli.

Many other Internet sites are available by entering the keywords "integrated communications."

**RESULTS:** One result of the IMC effort described in this study has been building stronger bridges between the advertising, public relations, and marketing faculties. The professors support Meiser' (1998) thesis that educators can benefit from studying IMC from a broad interdisciplinary perspective. The three professors periodically review the course content and work together to bring relevant ideas into the classroom to help students understand the vital role that each discipline plays in modern organizations.

One goal of the course is for students to achieve the realization that all three areas must work together to achieve organizational objectives. The plans that students develop as members of teams indicate that they indeed do have a better understanding of the importance of each discipline to the IMC process.

The faculty believes that the IMC course is helping to better prepare its students for the realities of the work environment of today and tomorrow. Formal surveys of alumni now working in the field are planned in the very near future to determine their specific job functions, if/how the IMC class has helped them in their jobs, and what can be done to make the class and programs more meaningful to the graduates. The faculty also wishes to learn if the

concern of Griffin and Pasadeos (1998) that the merging of public relations and advertising with marketing coursework will "ultimately impair students' abilities to become fluent in any single discipline" (p. 6).

The team believes that the approach they have developed for the class is working well. However, the original concept of having all three rotate the course for credit has not worked as designed due to conflicts in two of the professors' schedules. As the faculty continues to grow in all three disciplines, this problem should be resolved. The success of the program to date has been due to the good working relationship among three colleagues, each of whom is each willing to do his/her part to contribute to the education of students taking the class.

These professors do agree with Wilcox, Ault, Agee and Cameron (2000) that indeed integrated communications "is here to stay" (p19), and that students planning careers in advertising, public relations and marketing must be prepared to work together to fulfill organizational objectives. It is the responsibility of the faculties to prepare these future "integrated communicators" for the realities of the marketplace.

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