

Learning about Diversity Worldwide: How a Social Media Writing Assignment Provides Students with Multicultural Perspectives

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Studies and reports from public relations scholars, educators, and practitioners have shown that public relations students should gain intercultural competencies and multicultural perspectives before they enter the public relations industry. This article explains how a blog calendar and social media assignment for specific global markets can help students acquire international and multicultural competencies in the area of writing for the public relations classroom.

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Introduction and Rationale

In today's increasingly multicultural and globalized world, public relations professionals and students alike need to develop skills to communicate with diverse communities within their own country and abroad. In addition, communicators must create verbal and visual content to reach multicultural and international audiences, particularly with the increasing use of online platforms around the globe.

The author developed an assignment for students in a public relations writing class to create social media content and an editorial calendar for a blog on behalf of a fictitious retailer seeking to connect with diverse audiences in a specific international market. This assignment not only provided students with greater challenge and creativity but also required them to research and learn about multicultural populations and cultural traditions abroad.

Economic Reality and Shifting Demographics

Today's U.S. public relations practitioners, regardless of where they work, most likely will communicate with global markets. For example, foreign sales based on a percentage of total Standard & Poor's 500 sales exceeded 40%—43.6% in 2017, 43.2% in 2016, 44.3% in 2015, and 47.8% in 2014 (Silverblatt, 2018). The U.S. Small Business Association (Glaccum, 2019) touts on its website that “nearly 96 percent of consumers live outside the U.S., and two-thirds of the world's purchasing power is in foreign countries” (para. 2). The world is also experiencing shifting populations, geographical distribution of the middle class, and religious adherents. Demographic trends show a significant rise in global migration—among a population of 7.3 billion people, one out of every 30 residents resides outside his or her country of birth (International Organization for Migration, 2018)—bringing increasing diversity to countries with existing generations of multicultural people. In 2015, half of the 3 billion people classified as the global middle class were from

Asian countries, while the proportion of the middle class is estimated to increase to two-thirds from Asia by 2030 (Kharas, 2017). Predictions also indicate that the world's religious populations will continue to shift by 2050, with Muslims almost equaling Christians, the largest religious faith. The Buddhist population is predicted to remain stable, while Hindu and Jewish populations, various folk religions, and other religions (such as Baha'is, Jains, and Sikhs) will grow in size (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Global Interconnectivity

Interconnectivity steadily rises with more than half of the world online—56% of the world's population are active internet users (Statista, 2019a). In 2019, almost 3.5 billion people used social media platforms, a 9% rise over the previous year (Chaffey, 2019). Facebook draws 1.47 billion desktop daily active users and 1.57 billion mobile daily active users, with 85% of daily active users coming from outside of North America (Omnicores, 2019a). YouTube has over 2 billion logged-in visitors worldwide every month, with content in 80 languages and local versions in over 100 countries (YouTube, 2019). Instagram has approximately 1 billion monthly active users (Omnicores, 2019b) with the United States leading, followed by Brazil and India (Statista, 2019b), while 79% of Twitter's accounts are from outside the U.S. (Omnicores, 2019c). In addition, the blogosphere remains vibrant, with an estimated 505 million blogs (SoftwareFindr, 2018).

Need for Multicultural Perspectives in Public Relations

A number of scholars over the past few decades have recommended a greater emphasis on global perspectives, as well as multicultural, intercultural, and international skills for public relations students in the U.S.; they also recommend an integration of global and cultural diversity learning experiences in the classroom and overall curriculum (Bardhan, 2003; Creedon & Al-Khaja, 2005; Sriramesh, 2009; Zaharna, 2000). Taylor (2001) called for "internationalization" in

undergraduate education to enable students to become competent and culturally sophisticated public relations professionals in the global arena. Over the past decade, studies have examined other dimensions of global public relations education. Tsetsura (2011) recommended that students learn multidimensional diversity, with an analysis of master characteristics and interactional identities, to prepare for communicating within a global marketplace. Azionya et al. (2019) addressed the benefits of a value-based education approach that fosters an ethical and poly-contextual examination of diverse societies in public relations education. Wolf and Archer (2016) looked at successful learning outcomes for communicators to effectively manage in a global and digital era, which acknowledges not only technological skills, but “more importantly [demands] excellent on- and offline communication skills, tolerance, empathy and diplomacy” (p. 9).

Connection to Practice

The Commission on Public Relations Education 2017 Report on Undergraduate Education (2018) ranked writing for all platforms as a top skill for public relations. It addressed the desirability of diverse multicultural perspectives for entry-level job candidates in public relations. The report included diversity and inclusion results from the 2016 omnibus survey and found that public relations practitioners and professors rated diversity and inclusion as important KSAs (Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities) for new hires to have; for practitioners, the concept of diversity and inclusion was one of the top three ranked areas of knowledge needed by new hires. Practitioners “value candidates who demonstrate a multicultural perspective, but also indicated that they are not seeing that perspective” (p. 143-144). Not surprising, writing ranked as the most desirable skill (4.88 out of 5), followed by communication (4.76) and social media management (4.33). The report also examined preferred characteristics for new employees, which again pointed to writing performance as highly desired by practitioners (4.88), but not found as

frequently as desired (2.90).

The Global Communications Report (USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, 2019) surveyed both public relations practitioners and students about their views on the future impact of technology in the field. Following the PESO model (paid, earned, shared, and owned media), CEOs selected shared media (social media and online influencers) as the most valuable media for the future at 38%, whereas students ranked shared media as even more important at 70%. Another finding was the importance of the storytelling characteristics of imagery in the future: “YouTube and Instagram, whose popularity are based on photographs and videos, are projected to be the big winners in an era of decreasing attention span” (USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, 2019, p. 30).

Assignment and Implementation

A multicultural blog and social media assignment was introduced in a 300-level Writing for Public Relations course that requires students to create an editorial calendar for a new blog and write content and select visual imagery for specific social media platforms for a certain country. The author created a fictitious American-based retailer of home accessories and food products (a blend of Williams Sonoma, Sur La Table, and Pier 1), which was launching stores in a new international market. The fictitious co-founders of the retailer are a man and woman, with one from the U.S. and the other from another country. The retailer sells home décor, kitchenware, dinnerware, serving dishes, seasonal decorations, and food products from around the world. This context provides students with the ability to draw upon rich opportunities for storytelling and visual imagery. Food, for example, plays an important part in cultures of all kinds and continues to be a tradition handed down from generation to generation, particularly during the holidays and special occasions. Avid cooks of any background also enjoy trying recipes from other cultures. Croatian-Italian-American celebrity chef Lidia Bastianich (PBS, 2017) explains the

cultural significance of food: “Food feeds our souls. It is the single great unifier across all cultures. The table offers a sanctuary and a place to come together for unity and understanding” (para. 1). In addition, the fictional retailer’s holiday decorations provide content to illustrate diverse secular and non-secular celebrations on online platforms.

To date, the assignment has covered Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, Singapore, and South Africa. The country or countries for new markets can vary by semester. Students are required to reset the English language setting on Microsoft Word, which currently offers 16 versions of English. Although the computerized English language settings do not capture all nuances, they do help students grasp key differences between American English and other versions of English.

Before students work on the assignment, the instructor should cover the following topics:

- Intercultural and multicultural writing considerations on editing U.S. idioms and applying culturally sensitive verbal and visual content that avoids ethnocentrism and othering (i.e., avoid language “used to communicate instances of perpetuating prejudice, discrimination, and injustice either through deliberate or ignorant means,” MacQuarrie, 2010, p. 635);
- An overview of social media strategies, such as establishing clear communication goals and building brand awareness with relatable, shareable, and interactive content appealing to specific audiences, and writing tactics to attract a following;
- Preferred terms (following the latest edition of *The Associated Press Stylebook*), ethics, and decorum for blogs and social media platforms, along with real-world examples of blogs, tweets, and posts with impactful and appropriate visual imagery.

Students are required to research a specific country’s diverse population and religious preferences, as well as its national, secular, and

religious holidays, in order to create content that makes the retailer's products relatable with a soft-sell approach to the new market. The first part of the assignment is preparing a 12-month editorial calendar for a new blog. Students develop various story ideas (headline and first few sentences) that address the opening dates of the new stores; religious holidays celebrated by the diverse population; leading secular and national holidays; and other special events that celebrate the country's diversity (a few examples in Canada could include National Indigenous Peoples Day, Toronto Caribbean Carnival, Small World Music Festival, TD Mosaic Fest, and Pride Toronto).

Drawing upon the topics in the blog editorial calendar, students then create content for Twitter (three tweets with proposed handle, hashtags and image), Facebook (three posts with images, hashtag, and copy), Instagram (three posts with image, hashtag, and copy), and YouTube (explanations for three different videos describing visuals, story concept, and storytellers).

Students would require a minimum of one week to work on the assignment, which can be completed on an individual basis or in collaboration with one other student. Instructors should allocate one class session for in-class writing, where instructors can review and discuss drafts with students. A debriefing should take place after the assignments are graded and returned. The professor can show examples of both high- and lesser-quality student work (without identifying the students) on PowerPoint and engage in a discussion on culturally appropriate and respectful content with the entire class.

An assignment example with Canada as the new market is included in the Appendix.

Assessment

The key learning objectives for the multicultural blog and social media assignment are as follows: 1) to identify cultural traditions and

holidays that showcase the diversity of the population in other countries; 2) to compose visual and verbal content for the blog calendar and social media platforms; and 3) to develop intercultural writing skills in communicating with specific global audiences and their diverse populations, as well as skills for communicating online with the LGBTQ community.

Assignments are evaluated on the students' ability to accomplish the following: 1) to demonstrate knowledge of a range of holidays and cultural traditions covering diverse religions and populations in a specific country; 2) to write culturally respectful copy and select supporting imagery; 3) to incorporate the retailer's founders and types of food and home accessory products in the blog's editorial calendar and social media platforms as appropriate by using a tasteful, soft-sell approach; and 4) to edit and proofread copy thoroughly. This assignment counts for 10% of the total grade.

Conclusion

The author has observed that students seem to enjoy learning about cultural traditions in other countries and find the assignment engaging yet rigorous. One challenge has been helping the students learn how to write with an authentic voice, not one that sounds like hard-sell advertisements. Other students may need help learning how to avoid American idiomatic expressions. The solution can be to show examples of real-world tweets and posts that highlight various respectful, soft-sell approaches.

Although this assignment was designed for the Writing for PR course, it could be used in an International Public Relations course. With technology constantly evolving, the social media platforms could be adjusted to apply the most popular social media platforms worldwide. In addition, the instructor could change the "client" from a retailer of home accessories and food products to another type of organization. As noted earlier, the country selection could vary and include more than one country.

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Appendix A

Assignment (Example for Canada):

Editorial Calendar for Blog and Social Media Content

Assignment Guidelines: Your new “client,” Home Decor & Celebrations (a fictitious company like a blend of Pier 1, Sur La Table, and Williams Sonoma), is a retail chain based in Chicago, with 10 stores across the U.S., with new stores opening in Toronto, Ontario, in September 20XX and in Vancouver, British Columbia, in March 20XX. The company sells home

accessories, such as rugs, lighting, and window treatments; decorations for the holiday indoors and outdoors; dinnerware sets, cutlery, serving dishes, cookware, table linens, glasses, and barware; and coffees, teas, sauces, rubs, spices, oils, vinegars, pastas, condiments, baking mixes, cocktail mixes, and food gift sets. The company focuses on selling distinctive decorative, culinary, and utilitarian products from around the world. It also has hired a team of experts to prepare tips on how to decorate and entertain for various holidays and celebrations; how to use spices and sauces to liven up dishes; and how to decorate your home or apartment with international flair.

The founders are James Chandler, who was a chef at one of Chicago's most celebrated steakhouses, and Amanda Chang, who is from Vancouver and an award-winning interior designer in North America. They both have traveled to all continents and started an online business selling cookware, spices, and home decor from their journeys, and they later set up retail outlets in major cities in North America.

Your "client" needs your help in creating an editorial calendar for a new blog and social media content that announces the opening of the new stores and celebrates different holidays and religions in its new market, which reflect the multicultural diversity of the country's population. The company wants to appeal to diverse consumers at different stages of life— young professionals setting up their first home, newlyweds, and parents. The retailer sells low budget to higher-end products, many of which would be hard to find elsewhere.

Facts of interest on ethnicity, religion, holidays, and special events in Canada:

- Immigration and ethnicity in Canada: <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca>
- Religions in Canada: <http://www.thecanadaguide.com/culture/religion/>
- Holidays in Canada: <https://www.timeanddate.com/holidays/canada/>
- Special events in Toronto: <https://www.toronto.ca/explore-enjoy/>

festivals-events/

- Special events in Vancouver: <https://www.tourismvancouver.com/events/festivals-and-events/>

Deliverables:

1. Create a 12-month Editorial Calendar for the Canadian Market.

Develop content for a new blog that provides how-to advice and tips on decorating one's home and celebrating holidays and special events in Canada, as outlined in required topics. Give the blog a creative name and prepare an editorial calendar for a 12-month period, with three different story ideas for every month of appeal to this market. You can make up guest bloggers and add expert advice from the founders for some of the topics. Think about tips, fun trivia, and top ways to make things better or simpler. Write a headline for each story idea and a brief description (using full sentences) of two to four lines. Please use the template posted on Sakai.

Required Topics: The blog calendar must include the following events and holidays that tie in social gatherings, cooking, celebrations, holidays, decorating, and the seasons:

- Acknowledgement of the opening dates of the two new stores in Canada;
- Christian, Muslim, and Jewish holidays, as well as Lunar New Year, Vesak Day, and Diwali;
- Secular holidays, such as Thanksgiving and National Indigenous Peoples Day;
- National holidays celebrated in Canada, such as Victoria Day;
- Special events in both cities that celebrate Canada's culture and diversity, as well as the LGBTQ community.

2. Develop Examples of Social Media Content for the Canadian Market.

Create content for a variety of social media that would position the retailer

as the go-to source for advice on home décor and recipes for special occasions and holidays for its multicultural markets. You will have to use your imagination and find relevant images online—and identify special occasions and holidays in the country. Remember the retailer is trying to sell its products—but use a soft sell approach. Please address the country’s diverse audiences and religions, as well as holidays and special events. Refer to the blog calendar for ideas on topics.

Prepare content for each of the following social media platforms targeted to the country:

- Twitter (three tweets with a maximum of 280 characters and proposed handle and hashtags plus image)
- Facebook (three posts with images, hashtag, and copy with full sentences)
- Instagram (three posts with image, hashtag, and copy with full sentences)
- YouTube (concept for three different videos; describe in full sentences—visuals, story concept, and storytellers/spokespeople)

English: Reset the Review/Language setting to English (Canada). In the real world, the copy would be edited to Canadian English, which mostly uses Oxford English spelling, along with a French-language version. Apply such writing characteristics as culturally appropriate and respectful language; authentic and human tone, not institutionalized and hard sell; helpful and engaging tips and news; and relatable verbal and visual content for people to like, share, comment, or bookmark. See Sakai Resources/Social Media for links to articles about creating social media content for businesses and developing verbal and visual content for international audiences. Refer to your stylebook for usage of terms (gender, race, and religion, etc.).