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**Teaching Audience Analysis Through Worksheets:
Approaching Audience Analysis as Qualitative
Research**

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Rationale

You are a new employee, and your boss has an important meeting soon. She requests a brief informing her on a new client, an environmentally friendly lawn care company. This brief is an “Audience Analysis,” a common task in strategic communication. Audience analysis involves researching an organization, its context, goals and challenges. While public relations faculty are familiar with audience analysis and its role in strategic planning, what may be less well understood is that students need the “*how*,” or procedures for systematic audience analysis. That is, students should learn audience analysis as *qualitative research employers can review for thoroughness and accuracy*. Unfortunately, these skills are under-taught.

Student Learning Goals

Science students may never study communication in their coursework, and fewer are taught to approach audience analysis in a disciplined manner. In addition, communication students learn about audience analysis, but may not be taught a systematic approach. To remedy this deficit, many universities are now offering courses in science communication as well as courses in communication strategy. These courses often involve projects helping real clients. Students enroll from a variety of backgrounds and know *what* they want to accomplish, but not *how*. One of the “how’s,” rarely taught in scientific contexts, is systematic audience analysis. Professionals skilled in systematic audience analysis are needed in government, nonprofits, and for-profits.

Connection to Public Relations Theory and/or Practice

Theory and practice show clients are most helped when practitioners understand and address their goals and challenges (Botan, 2018; Brunner, et al., 2018; Lutrell & Capizzo, 2019; Newsom, VanSlyke Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2013). Students can assist clients when they internalize “procedural knowledge” needed for thorough audience analysis. As Hillocks (1986) established, using experiments and meta-analysis, teaching students *what* we instructors want is inadequate. Focus should also be on procedural knowledge. Helping students understand what we want them to produce is useless without engaging them in *how* to do it (p. 240).

Evidence of Student Learning

We studied two strategic campaigns classes and two classes in communicating science to decision makers. In each, some students worked with environmentally engaged clients such as an environmentally friendly lawn care company or the U. S. National Park Service. In three of the four classes, students completed a systematic worksheet for audience analysis. In the fourth, they followed a detailed assignment that tapped social

science theory to analyze the client's request. Students received feedback on the thoroughness and accuracy of their analyses prior to meeting clients. Fifteen students were interviewed. Overall, they said disciplined audience analysis was enlightening and helpful. One science student said: "I just wouldn't have thought to research my audience. . . I didn't really think about . . . what they value." A communication student said: "Some . . . questions [on the worksheet] would not be things we would be thinking . . . [and thinking] . . . about the audience . . . can spark ideas."

The Assignment

We append the *Qualitative Research Approach to Audience Analysis Worksheet* along with references. In the worksheet, students provide a concise sum of their findings following each set of questions. An environmentally friendly lawn care company is used as an example.

References

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Appendix

Qualitative Research Approach to Audience Analysis Worksheet

This assignment presents audience analysis as a procedure for qualitative research. It uses a planning worksheet. In this illustration, an environmental lawn care company is the client.

Students sum findings, and insert them after each question, which encourages conciseness. Instructors review completed worksheets for accuracy and thoroughness before students interview their client. These steps help students confirm their understanding of the client's request and consider initial proposals.

1. Client Basics

Students identify the standard and publicly available information about the environmental lawn care company. This baseline information includes, but is not limited to, organization name, address, contact information, or hours of operation. This information is summarized here.

2. What and Why

After compiling basic information, students learn the motivations or goals of the environmental lawn care company. What do they do and how do they function? How are they different from other lawn care companies? Brief examples or stories are helpful here.

3. Public/Audiences

Students identify the internal and external audiences for this company. Internal audiences might include employees. External audiences for the environmental lawn care company might include existing clients or investors, local environmental and gardening experts, extension agents,

and governmental authorities monitoring drought, flooding, wetlands, or water quality.

4. Client and Stakeholders by the Numbers

Students find statistical ways of characterizing the audience. This may take the form of “likes” on social media, number of employees, or financial indicators, depending on what is most applicable for the environmental lawn care company. Other “numbers” could include years in business, annual sales, most requested services, and types of customers (type of residence, business, size of lot, distance from company to customer sites).

5. Competitive Environment

Students identify competitors and other organizations that offer similar services to the environmental lawn care company, How does the company compare and why? What are the company’s strengths and weaknesses?

6. Trends, Issues

What are the trends impacting the environmental lawn care company?
What issues affect how business is conducted? Are there tax incentives for certain uses of land? Regulations about wetlands, flood plains? Incentives for planting native trees and flowers? Incentives for reducing fertilizer? Supporting pollinators? Discouraging deer, geese, or pests naturally? Replanting lawns with wild prairie grasses or flowers? Xeriscaping?

7. Past, Present, Future

What’s the story of the environmental lawn care company? How did it get started? How has it developed? Why is it important that it is an *environmental* lawn care company, and what are the company’s future prospects, plans, goals, and interim objectives?

8. Humanize, Values

Humanize this company by learning its stories. Is the company socially responsible and how? Is the company trusted by customers and other publics? Do the owners and employees have community involvements?

9. Communication/Media Audit

Students seek publicly available data, or, if the client makes this possible, they seek data from private, paid sources. They should ask, what media have covered or could cover the company and why? When and how is the environmental lawn care company mentioned in news media? Is that coverage *ad hoc* or planned? What further media coverage -- and by which outlets -- would be most beneficial to the company's goal? Does the company have a website? What social media metrics are available? What are they? Do customers and prospective customers use the same social media outlets or others? Is the business featured in news shared by gardening clubs, homeowners' associations, retirees, schools, and universities?

10. Summarize Conditions Prompting Client Interest in Strategic Communication

Describe why the environmental lawn care company is seeking communication assistance at this time. Why is this important to them?

11. Summarize Client's Communication Goal

Place a concise statement of what you think this client most wants here.

12. Behaviors Client Wants to Influence

What does the company most want? Increased sales of expensive but environmentally beneficial services such as replanting wooded areas or xeriscaping? Relationships with large clients such as local universities or

large businesses? What individual, social, political, and environmental factors affect the chances of creating *enduring* change among customers and the services they seek? Consider tax incentives or political changes. What steps might incentivize *short-term* behavioral change such as discounts?

More Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes

A number of interviewed students said completing the audience analysis worksheet was helpful. Said one student about the value of disciplined audience analysis:

“[The class required] you . . . to be prepared before you start[ed] a task or project. If you’re not prepared, you’re going to be spending a lot of time to fill in those gaps.”

This student also said completing the worksheet assisted her in producing written products:

“It should be seamless. It should be, oh, the information’s right here, take that and transfer to the project at hand. Like if it’s a press release, who’s my intended audience? Let me look at the sheet so super useful tool to have.”

In addition, one instructor said the precision and detail of students’ responses to the worksheet was a good indicator of the effectiveness of their proposals for their clients:

“[A] detailed worksheet produces a better plan or proposal. And so, the weaker the worksheet, the weaker the proposal, because if this [the worksheet] is imprecise, . . . [the plan] isn’t going to have great ideas. Or it may have great ideas, but it may have nothing to do with what this [the problem] is.”

Looking back over several years of teaching, this instructor also reported that students who learned to complete audience analysis worksheets thoroughly, through repeated practice and feedback, have done well

professionally:

“They’ve . . . been promoted . . . they’re doing fantastic.”