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## Book review:

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### **Center, A. H., & Jackson, P. (2002). *Public relations practices: Managerial case studies and problems* (6th Ed.). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.**

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This is Center and Jackson's sixth edition, with fifteen new cases, former cases updated to 2001, twelve "classics" and the addition of nine new problems for students to debate and work on. The book opens with two establishing chapters on purposes, guidelines, professionalism, and planning. The authors work from a behavioural perspective of PR, use Grunig's "PR problems" paradigm to show how PR adds value, take the reader through the planning process, and sum up with more information on the behavioural model. The chapters conclude with problems designed to drive home some of the points of the chapter that might seem rather daunting to novice students. Chapters on employee relations, community relations, investor relations, consumer relations, media relations, public issue campaigns and debates, crisis management, and standards, ethics, and values then follow. The book closes with some advice on career preparation, including what to say at the interview. Chapters open with an ably summarised introduction to the topic, including the role that PR plays. The cases, each with a few discussion questions, follow, and the section concludes with two or three problems.

A major strength of the book is its tightness and readability. The authors get straight down to business, packing in an enormous number of cases, each only a few pages long and broken up with useful headings, bullet points, and so on. The problems put the reader in the driver's seat with short, colloquially-written scenarios. Another major plus is that there are a number of examples where strategies went wrong, or where organisations picked the wrong response, learning only reluctantly from experience. These

are candidly told and not every tale has a happy ending.

The cases often work better at prompting generalised discussion on business, communication and ethical issues than as a "how to" or providing lessons learned. This approach does prompt discussion on some key issues germane to practice and professionalism. The chapter on public issues campaigns and debates is a case in point. The cases cover a number of public campaigns, like smoking, abortion, and gun control, the controversies surrounding them and the role communicators have played on opposing sides. In the community relations chapter, a summary of the conflict over the Department of Energy's proposal to dispose of radioactive waste on Nevada's Yucca Mountain provides some discussion of "environmental racism" that has relevance to indigenous peoples in Australia and New Zealand.

But what if students are looking for practical advice, details of best practice, or to learn lessons from worst practice? Here several cases in the media relations and crisis management sections are useful and there are practical details in a couple of cases from investor and consumer relations. In general, though, the brevity and broad focus of cases, while they make for interesting reading, make them unsuitable for building students' skills knowledge. For instance, in the employee relations chapter, the celebrated story of how the president of Malden Mills (maker of Polarfleece) retained his employees and rebuilt his factory after a disastrous fire, the description of corporate culture at Southwest Airlines, and Motorola's commitment to TQM, are focused on corporate

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direction and have little to do with communications; strategic or otherwise. The case covering the Kodak “snapshots” programme, designed to improve employee morale, would be more helpful to students, but the key details are so sketchy as to offer little guidance. In fact, despite the challenging problems presented to students, this chapter along with most in the book perhaps inadvertently underline the often purely technical, rather than strategic, role played by PR practitioners.

This is perhaps demanding that the book should deliver more than it sets out to do. The authors say that teachers find their narrative case study style allows students to gain the experience of picking out problem situations, conducting an environmental scan, and having to decide whether the solutions chosen were wise or flawed. The text is of course America-centric and that, perhaps more than anything else, means that it is more a valuable resource for teachers rather than an Australasian classroom classic. There is still a crying need for more “warts-and-all” cases from down-under that meet our needs and present our social and political perplexities and preoccupations.

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