A sense of agency: Utilising firms in the public relations campaigns course.

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Abstract

Extending Benigni and Cameron (1999) and subsequent works, this article espouses the notion of agency partnership in the public relations campaigns course. Because 90 percent of U.S. campaigns professors utilise an "agency structure" in this capstone course, it stands to reason that area firms are a natural bridge to fully embracing the concept. The authors examine pedagogical, role definition, and careerist literature, and offer a 10-part list of best practices for agency partnership.

Introduction

The campaigns class is now entrenched as the capstone experience in public relations education. The course has spawned many variations, but there are several baseline tenets inherent in almost all offerings. These tenets include a team-based approach with usually four or five students per, on behalf of a "real-world" client, and in an "agency-style" setting. It is that last notion that provides the greatest (untapped) opportunity for the campaigns professor. This paper focuses on literature and tenets from American public relations practices, and can serve as a baseline for readers around the world to adapt as they see fit in their own cultures and academic programs.

Capstone literature in recent American public relations journals reveals that the professor is more of a facilitator, which echoes Einstein's famous credo: "I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they learn" (Thinkexist, 2008, n.p). The art of facilitation depends largely on the brushstrokes. Public relations campaigns professors often work by a paint-by-numbers approach, which is easy to canvass, but fails to provide texture and colour to budding artists.

Literature review

The campaigns course: A gateway to relationship-building

Ledingham (2003) argues that "today's public relations graduates are entering a world in which an understanding of management processes is increasingly considered a necessary part of the practitioner's skill set" (p. 193), and that relationship management supports the need to review public relations curricula so that students gain requisite management training. Kinnick and Cameron (1994) call for more "nuts and bolts" management training, which can lead to mutually beneficial relationships and a long-term organisational commitment (Ledingham, Bruning, & Wilson, 1999).

Relationships are a barometer of trust between individuals (and the publics they encounter), and while a supervised, structured learning experience is critical in a campaigns course (Toth, 1999), student autonomy and responsibility are also key tenets of experiential learning in public relations (Gibson, 1998). Because it is usually based on a real-world capstone experience, the campaigns course is an optimal environment to enhance those traits (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000; Benigni & Cameron, 1999). Upper-level offerings should also foster "active learning" or collaborative

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strategies (Lubbers & Gorcyca, 1997; Coombs & Rybacki, 1999) between students, faculty, and clients that represent real-world opportunities.

The course should incorporate notions of searching for and retaining clients, according to Benigni, Cheng, and Cameron (2004). Their national study of campaigns professors notes that 96 percent use actual clients (on or off-campus), and 90 percent of their courses work within a classroom "agency" structure. For many professors, there is a significant research and scanning component, as only 60 percent have a prior affiliation with the client before the course, and 92 percent seek referrals for the course. Rentner (2000) notes that these variables of access and logistics often lead campaigns professors to offer only on-campus clients.

Ultimately, the campaigns course can foster a keen, synergistic understanding of research and ethics that leads to an "independence" where the students actually serve the role of teachers (Worley, 2001), and to a "connection" (Benigni, Weaver Lariscy, & Tinkham, 2002) where students take ownership and evolve into thinkers and managers. This "intellectual readiness" (Maglio-Jung, 1994) is crystallised through the campaigns course's synthesis of practical knowledge and professional skill (Schwartz, Yarbrough, & Shakra, 1992). Coombs (2001) notes that agency professionals can bring cases to life by sharing experiences with campaigns students.

Still, Stacks (1998) posits that practitioners have, at best, a lukewarm respect for public relations professors because of their collective lack of research and assessment knowledge. He adds that there is a direct correlation between the perception of the profession, and of its educators. Fearn-Banks (2004) counters that the onus should be placed on professionals to gain greater knowledge and appreciation for their counterparts in the academy.

While some firms hire research specialists, all—regardless of size and specialty—can team with communication scholars at major research universities (Wood, 2006) to provide public opinion and public campaign research capabilities for clients, sponsors and/or grant recipients.

Role differentiation

Capstone courses are often designed to incorporate bottom-line reasoning and objectives, to mirror expectations of corporate America. There are positive correlations (Kim, 2000) between public relations goals (usually set during the action plan) and bottom-line contributions (assessment or final campaign phase), or more succinctly, between reputation and revenues. According to the Council of Public Relations Firms (2006), businesses are moving away from marketer control to consumer control with regard to communication strategies. Strategic public relations constitutes the driving force for brand-building and reputation, educating publics, and dialoging with consumers, a transactional perspective espoused by Woodward (2000), especially with regard to dealing with diverse publics.

Oftentimes, decision makers diagnose strategic issues according to an historicist trend, such as the amount of change adopted by their organisation (Lauzen, 1995). Change agents, such as those pushing to integrate communication disciplines (e.g., IMC), have spawned a corresponding curricular integration (Johnson & Ross, 2000), particularly with regard to public relations and advertising (Falb, 1991). This demonstrates a trend toward synergy that opens up a more direct relationship route to management (Hallahan, 1992). An inclusive, strategic management approach in which students attain business development experience (Sallot, 1996) from professors that have extensive professional experience (Kent & Taylor, 2005) are more recent developments in the campaigns course.

The expanding scope of the profession: The firm's role

Agency work provides a sense of (client) flexibility, a highly valued commodity for many practitioners, and also for companies trying to respond to employee needs for work

and lifestyle balance (Tench, Fawkes, & Palihawadana, 2002). Smudde (2004) notes the Burkean philosophy—indicative of agency life today—of symbolic action where practitioners need a combination of cooperation and shrewdness in order to successfully manage multiple audiences simultaneously. Agency balance between firm and client is often tested through conflict (Bourland, 1993) that could potentially compromise communication flow, finances, and "chemistry".

Critics complain that public relations practitioners tweak and flaunt meaningless statistics (e.g., agencies' obsession with media impressions) in lieu of rich qualitative work (Boynton, Shaw, & Callaghan, 2004), or have a nebulous notion of professional performance (Sallot, Cameron, & Weaver Lariscy, 1997). Edgett (2002) states that the advocacy function is not to blame (when situations appear unethical), but lies instead on the practitioner's failure to ascertain the rightness or wrongness of actions, or more simply, the execution of the advocacy function. Managers that make unilateral communication decisions and eschew dialogical approaches (Neff, 2006) often represent an inconsistent organisational approach to ethics and endanger the reputation of the organisation (Bowen, 2005).

Sources directly affiliated with an organisation on whose behalf they speak are more negatively perceived and less effective than an independent source (Callison, 2004). Pollard (2006) notes that advocacy is weakened if practitioners aren't grounded with journalistic senses and skills. For example, the urgency of meeting deadlines is borne out by Theaker and Fitzgerald's (2006) study of public relations campaign teams, in which task completion ranked highest (of 10 skills) by both students and professionals. Motivation and positive attitude or personality (Brown & Fall, 2005) also serve as critical factors in job placement.

The value of agency involvement in the campaigns course might be best described by Saunders and Perrigo (1998). They note that success goes beyond professional status, or distinctions achieved. The true litmus variable is professionalism, which they note as the "professional skills and ethics to which professionals should aspire", and that the assistance and expertise of agency professionals is critical in that mission.

Discussion and ramifications

The aforementioned, longstanding tenets of public relations—relationship building, role definition/understanding and ethics—are especially critical in the agency setting where an organisation trusts an outside entity to represent them. How do we hold agencies accountable? The longstanding principle of billable hours is still an agency cornerstone, and also for the collegiate capstone. In essence, "put up or shut up" might be the advice of an agency head when interviewing the would-be account manager, or from a professor trying to kick-start a student team. Preparing students for life outside the campus grounds is a critical function of any capstone course, especially in public relations campaigns. We stress dependability and accountability. But can we truly gauge the competitive and eclectic nature of agency life without the students—and likely many of our instructors—having any idea of how the agency business operates?

This essay probes into potential uses (and misuses) of incorporating area firms into the pedagogical and networking functions of the campaigns course. This relatively untapped resource (firms) can be used in a number of ways, as will be illustrated later.

Before incorporating agencies into the course, the professor should reflect on desired "agency structure" tenets, outlined in this template by Wood (JWA 2006):

1. Effective selection of the client
    a. Make sure to obtain open, almost unlimited access to client leadership
    b. Consider the size and "fit" of the client organisation
    c. Leverage the consultation services against career opportunities.

2. Properly paced course schedule
   a. If necessary, review previous coursework in the PR sequence during first few weeks of the campaigns class, or insert a review of principles at appropriate times in the course to cover traditional campaign elements such as research and action planning, and management issues such as budget, timeline and feasibility
   b. Structured use of EVERY class period
   c. Periodic deadlines to prevent procrastination
3. Proper Selection of the Team(s).

Wood continues: "as for 'deliverables'—the actual communication tactics or tools developed on behalf of clients, i.e., Web sites, brochures, news releases, event ideas, etc.—presented at the conclusion of the campaign, it is interesting to note (and for the students to learn) that clients are very much focused on the tangibles of 'what they get' from participating in a campaigns class. Although as instructors and professionals, we attempt to keep them focused on strategic objectives, to assure an action plan is focused and effective, the client is very much excited about (and often decides winning bids as a result of) the 'deliverables' that potentially will be put to use at the conclusion of the campaign. So, never underestimate the importance of quality and quantity of tactics delivered to clients at the conclusion of campaigns."

Therefore, the challenge for campaigns professors is to provide time and tutelage to develop evolved tactics, within an ethical and strategic framework and grounded in flexibility due to the nature of public relations practice, which expose students to a multiplicity of viewpoints from the best available mentors.

A new framework for agency partnership

Professors consistently report that campaigns is the most challenging course to teach, given the volatile dynamics of teamwork, the fluid nature of working with busy and sometimes uncooperative clients, and the "back-ended" nature of the course in terms of grading and workload (final plan book and client presentation). There's a reason why most professors don't take on the course in a regular rotation.

One major struggle for professors is simple. While some may have relevant and even laudable field experience, many teachers are unfamiliar with the unique and rapidly changing demands of agency work. In truth…can we really replicate the agency structure within the course without immersing students into some baseline knowledge of how a firm operates?

How should the professor incorporate agencies into the course structure, in terms of pedagogy and timeline? Assuming that the typical semester is about 14-15 weeks, it's a chore to add layers to a course model that typically includes several phases of primary research (focus groups and questionnaires), tactic development (special events, seminars), and communication materials (releases, PSAs, web site copy/design), just to name a few. But what the agency-partnership model can do is strengthen pedagogy, not burden it.

There are a number of ways to incorporate communication agencies into the campaigns course. Here are 10 tips that may help:

1. *Don't wait until the campaigns course!* Forward-thinking programs and newly minted public relations professors should contact agency representatives and arrange meetings. After building an initial relationship (through internships and other fora), try to visit as many firms as possible and absorb the work culture and pace. Analyze the "successes" of their clientele through non-intrusive methods such as environmental scanning and media accounts. Regularly consult key trade publications (*PRWeek*), online discussions (*PRForum*), and magazines (*The Strategist*) to gauge trends and make potential contacts. Because search assignments often take months and up to several interviews for one agency position (Needleman, 2006), professors should be prepared to give career

advice to students long before a (curricular) career-ending capstone course.

2. *Ask for their help in finding clients for your course*. Oftentimes, students can't appreciate the major dilemma facing most firms, which is to pursue and land clients. Largely because of time constraints (but also because of the lack of requisite student experience), most campaigns professors have already done the legwork and hand-picked the clients. By working with agencies, professors can delve for clients beyond the college walls and needy local nonprofits, who are worthy but are sometimes hands-off and even fawning participants. Most firms have clients that don't "fit" their size or specialty, and nearly all firms have referred such to associates, subcontractors, or even competitors. While agencies are highly protective of their clients, you will be surprised how many firms will welcome assistance from university programs, as evidenced by the Benigni et al. study from 2004. While public relations textbooks tout the objectivity that firms offer over in-house counsel, firms with long-time accounts could suffer from an acculturation effect. Therefore, agencies may wish to expose select clients to a fresh form of outside counsel, which you can provide. The public relations goodwill available to participating firms and clients cannot be understated. Most are involved in government and/or community relations, which a relationship with a college or university capstone course would promote.
3. *Invite account executives and/or managers as classroom speakers, or as participants in campus seminars*. This practice seems to be a staple in the principles (intro) course, but for some reason, many professors go it alone in the capstone. Who better to help design the agency structure of the class than one who lives it every day? Agency reps have expertise in team-building, the notion of billables and deliverables, deadline pressures, working with problem clients, and setting measurable objectives. The case studies and anecdotal evidence they provide is inspiring to the students, and to the professor, and sets an energetic tone for the course. Most agency reps have extensive presentations at the ready, with slick supplemental materials (videos, clips, web sites). And most have experience with handling crises, which are always captivating case studies for students.
4. *Persuade account executives/agency heads to entertain team-teaching opportunities, or as adjuncts.* The synergy between a public relations professor/researcher and a top-level practitioner can be a transforming experience for both parties, as well as the students. Because many professors lack significant, or even recent professional experience, having someone who handles multiple and varied clients brings freshness and perspective. Students respond favourably to experts who have faced crises, staged events, and counselled politicians. Because the course is not typically lecture-driven, the practitioner-professor can share in team-building activities, client management counselling, and facilitating of weekly account meetings. For this arrangement to work, flexibility is key. An account executive may only be able to commit to one day (lecture/presentation/etc.) per week, but with creative use of technology, that co-professor can still be a profound virtual presence, through use of email, phones, course management software (WebCT) or even videoconferencing. Also, many professionals have excelled as stand-alone adjunct campaigns professors, but it is advisable for department heads to provide sufficient mentoring and resources in terms of funding and flexibility.
5. *Transition and leverage your momentum from the final plan book and presentation.* Arguably the most influential student takeaway from the course, even more so

than the portfolio, is the power of contacts. How many times have you heard a satisfied client after a student presentation say, "Do you need an internship?" (According to a 2004 study by Benigni, Cheng, and Cameron, 89 percent of team members receive a job or internship opportunity) or "Send me a resume!" Indeed, some students actually continue on with the client, though others are ready to move on after four hectic months with one client/campaign, and/or that organisation is just not a good fit. However, an agency "presence" in the course as a guest speaker, adviser, or client facilitator provides another layer of opportunity for exposing worthy students to entry-level opportunities.

6. *Partner with your PRSSA chapter (or related student organisation)*. Busy firms may be more likely to provide access and expertise if you can maximise their involvement. If an agency believes they can reach multiple student audiences, such as a vibrant PRSSA chapter, it increases their chances of meeting potential interns, providing advice or materials for the Bateman Case Study Competition (many schools use the Bateman client for their campaigns), or participating in departmental outreach programs, to name a few. Most PRSSA students in stand-alone majors or concentrations eventually take the campaigns course.

7. *Network with area PRSA/AdFed/IABC members*. Most universities are within driving distance of a local or regional chapter. Networking with agency managers at luncheons, professional development conferences, and seminars can spawn a more formal relationship. If area professionals see professors as an earnest and respected face of the program, it greatly enhances opportunities for partnerships. Membership in national and local professional organisations is a sound investment; beyond the logical networking opportunities, there are established programs for personal and professional development. Also, members-only websites and trade publications allow professors to research issues and trends, passing along such insights to their students. This legwork allows the professor to reach a comfort level (personally and professionally) with agencies, so that a partnership in the capstone course seems unforced and natural.

8. *Organise shadowing/mentoring experiences with agencies*. Having senior-level students observe practitioners in their environment provides for a strong curricular partnership. While individual (or group) mentoring arrangements must be planned out for logistics and to avoid work disruption, the experience will prove quite rewarding for both student and practitioner. As in most forays into practitioner life, both professor and student should undertake significant research to gain an understanding of the mission and specialisation of the firm, and of its clientele. Because of the boutique nature of many agencies, it is advisable to have small groups of students to best absorb office culture, and to be able to fit in vehicles if agency reps allow students to accompany them on client visits. This experience can logically be incorporated into the campaigns syllabus. In fact, it might serve as an effective graded (program) assignment, remembering again the importance of periodic deadlines to keep student teams moving on their campaigns.

9. *Involve agencies in student-centred networking events*. Themed, regularly scheduled events such as a "Public Relations Day" or a career/internship fair are orchestrated outlets for firms to showcase their brand/counsellors to a large target audience. In turn, students and faculty can capitalise on a centralised, organised, and captive setting to meet future internship advisers or even employers. This is the department's chance to really impress public relations managers. Universities and departments have a duty

to showcase their top students, within their physical and cultural environments, to would-be employers. Such publicity would have a positive spill-over effect to other publics such as prospective students and alumni. Many agency heads cite first-impression traits (proper dress, firm handshake, listening skills) as a primary prerequisite to making their short list. The campaigns course should broach elements of client interaction, especially with regard to initial briefing periods, and ultimately the client pitch/presentation at term's end.

10. *Use agency heads to beef up or help organise your departmental advisory board/council*. This may be the most untapped of all available resources. Because of their connections to high-profile clients, media gatekeepers and industry moguls, agency executives can be a lynchpin in helping departments establish an advisory board, not to mention serving as prime candidates for positions on these boards as well. Companies have a high stake in education, and most consider it a privilege to be asked to serve in an advisory capacity, especially if it's among nationally known peers. Councils are often dominated by corporate/agency types, and can be diversified by choosing from a number of specialty areas (sports/entertainment consultants, political counsellors, corporate communication directors, etc.). Councils allow for a national representation of top practitioners, who ideally can provide virtual mentoring, of sorts, for students (and eventual internship/job offers for students), or presentations at campus educational forums (that can branch from council site visits). Campaigns professors should make every effort possible to incorporate visiting council members into a special lecture.

Conclusion

Professors are often hesitant to approach agency heads for assistance. This notion is grounded in several factors. First, because account executives or managers are perceived to be so focused on billables, and caught up in the frenzied pace of their work, they are perceived to have little or no time for inquiries from professors. Second, agencies often don't practice what they preach, specifically in terms of "the need for a prolonged briefing period" with a potential client (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006). Also, the rural nature of some universities makes it difficult to forge a personal relationship with firms, most of which are based in larger population centres.

Furthermore, agencies aren't usually eager to commit to outside projects because of the volatile nature (e.g., breaking crisis, client management, retainer issues) of their profession. We all know the frustration of having guest speakers or professional partners cancelling engagements at the last minute. Agency practitioners perhaps have the most demanding schedules in the profession.

Still, the enormous opportunities provided by agency partnership—such as client exposure, genre-specific expertise (event planning or research and assessment) and job/internship avenues -- far outweigh the aforementioned concerns. With continued growth in specialty public relations (corporate communication, health communication, environmental stewardship, investor relations, and event management, to name a few), public relations programs continue to add breadth to their curricula and also to internship and outreach programs. Professors need to broach real-world factors of competition and conflict. However, we should not wholly depend on long-standing yet short-sighted adoptions of (often-desperate) agency measures such as media impressions or advertising equivalency, hence the need to carefully choose agency partners.

And there is much to gain for the agency partners willing to assist academic colleagues in their campaigns course. The overriding reason for practitioners to get involved in a

capstone course is to engage in mutually beneficial relationships, as noted by Ledingham, Bruning, and Wilson (1999), and to improve upon what Stacks (1998) calls their lukewarm respect for public relations professors, and vice versa. Practitioners, since they have a vested interest in the quality of PR graduate entering the profession from institutions of higher education, desire to gain greater knowledge, and appreciation for academics.

In addition, students participating in a capstone course are human resources with highly developed skills and talents, representing a rich talent base for practitioners who may be in the market for hiring account executives and ultimately, the next generation of agency managers and directors. Like any talent scout, a practitioner is better served seeing the current crop of potential hires in action, to validate the motivation, positive attitude, and personality traits that are critical factors in job placement, as noted by Brown and Fall (2005) and in the fifth of the top 10 tips outlined here.

Most importantly, however, practitioners assisting in campaigns courses can subsequently bring added value to all clients—from those participating in class campaigns, to those under contract with the agency, to those potential clients being solicited. Clients often review the community relations involvement of agencies prior to hiring them, and what better way to illustrate such than for an agency to have on its resume an active role in providing public relations students with practical experience on real-world campaigns? A working relationship with an institution of higher education—and its capstone scholars who represent the future of the industry—can become an agency attribute that sets it apart from its competitors.

The campaigns course, then, is that bridge to real-world public relations. This world, especially in agencies, is getting increasingly complicated. The budding account manager must craft winning RFPs, master multi-platform PDAs, and satisfy driven CEOs. It's up to professors to spell this out to students, and to capitalise on agents of change.

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