
The case for case studies: Optimising the use of communication cases

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Abstract

Case studies are widely used by communication and public relations practitioners and educators. Yet, despite their extensive use, the question should be asked whether public relations case studies are applied in the best possible way. Many tertiary education institutions are moving away from case study analysis as a discrete subject and instead adopting a 'case study approach' across the communication curriculum. This paper explores the merits of different styles of the case method and the reference materials available, and concludes that formalised analysis of case studies is essential to fully optimise their application.

Introduction

Realistic cases can add genuine value in many fields of public relations study – including risk communication, issue and crisis management, marketing communication, event management, government relations, employee communication, and community outreach. Indeed, the Commission on Public Relations Education (1999) determined that a course on case studies which review the professional practice is essential for quality undergraduate public relations education. This was reaffirmed by the Commission's major follow-up study seven years later (Turk, 2006).

Yet Pauly and Hutchison (2001) concluded that, while public relations practitioners and educators use case studies regularly, they "have not thought systematically about what it means to investigate, write, read, or teach a case" (p. 381). Similarly Stacks (2002) agreed: "Although the case study as an informal research method is found throughout

public relations education and practice, very little explanation of the case study method appears in the literature" (p. 81).

Stacks suggested this may be because the focus of public relations research over the past decade has been on social science method or formal research methodology. But a simpler answer could be that the use of case studies appears so self-evident that little explanation seems necessary. In reality however, the way in which communication case studies are presented, and the style of published case studies used as resource material, merits closer examination.

In an educational environment, case studies can generally be utilised in two ways – either a generalised 'case study approach', or formalised analysis of particular cases as a discrete subject. This paper explores the broad process of the case study method, and then compares elements of the two principal approaches. The conclusion is that while case histories will always be used as examples across the curriculum, structured analysis of particular cases within a formal theoretical framework promotes optimal understanding of public relations.

The case study method

On the face of it a case study is easily defined. A 1971 definition by Schramm (cited in Yin, 1989) says: "The essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions; why they were taken, how they were implemented and with what result" (p. 23).

Turning specifically to the area of public relations, cases have been described as the "condensed wisdom of the profession" (Pauly & Hutchison, 2001, p. 381). As Hendrix (2004) describes it, they "effectively illustrate public

relations principles and management and test theoretical applications in real situations and environments” or what he calls “the PR process in action” (p. 5).

There has been extensive discussion of the distinctions between the terms *case*, *case history*, *case analysis*, *case problem* and *case study*, as well as the difference between a *case* and a *campaign* (including Pauly & Hutchison, 2001; Kruckeberg & Bowen, 2004). In addition O’Rourke (2001) coined a further categorisation of case studies into *field cases* (written with the cooperation of managers and executives who experienced the events and problems described); *library cases* (based on publicly available information without special access to the organisations involved) and *armchair cases* (fictional documents, usually written by business educators, which may bear some resemblance to authentic cases, but which never really occurred).

For the present purposes, the case study method is summarised as critically examining a real or hypothetical case in relation to recognised public relations theories and models, and in the context of alternative solutions to optimise outcomes.

Within this general framework, the broad benefits of the case study method have been well described. Mier, for example (1982), argued that the case method in an organisational communication course helps *formulate* key concepts introduced in textbooks, readings and classroom lectures; helps *reinforce* learning through application of key concepts; and helps students *pinpoint* the communication issue as it relates to other organisational contingencies. Her conclusion was that effective use of the case method should result in a facilitation of learning which questions the underlying organisational goals and managerial values affecting communication attitudes, assumption and policies. “Cases dramatically introduce students to a basic assumption of communication – constant adaptation. As the nearest imitation of organisational life, cases teach a method of diagnosis and analysis for

each new situation as it affects organisations and their executives” (p. 152).

In a similar vein the Australian authors Galloway and Kwansah-Aidoo (2005) said that leaning about issues and crisis management through case studies:

will help illumine how organisations can prepare for potential difficulty and how their people cope under pressure when a foreseen challenge becomes a real one. A case study approach makes sense because of the potential it offers for students to learn from specific and useful examples from the past (p. 4).

In this respect, Kruckeberg and Bowen (2004) have explored in detail the different teaching methods and concluded that, as long as steps are taken to ensure that the course adheres to a rigorous conceptual and theoretical analysis of cases, rather than memorising the minutiae of the case, such courses can be an effective learning experience. But it has been argued (Kreps & Lederman, 1985) that beyond definition and the broad benefits of the case method, it is the way case studies are utilised which characterises the difference between adequate and excellent understanding.

The case study approach

There are two main methods of case study teaching – the generalised approach, using case studies to support teaching across the communication curriculum, and formal analysis of particular cases in a discrete course. The first of these—the generalised approach—has distinct merit by introducing real-life examples of both good and bad practice to illustrate different elements of the profession. It is also strongly reinforced by many modern textbooks—particularly at the undergraduate level—which frequently use brief case histories deliberately positioned within the text to support a particular chapter or accentuate a particular area of practice.

Brief case histories used in this way as examples certainly help make the topic under discussion more intelligible and compelling, and provide legitimate form and colour.

However, the generalised approach also has some significant shortcomings. Firstly, cases provided in purely narrative form are usually assumed to be true and are assumed to support the point at issue. Even though purportedly true, such cases are, of course, often “a fiction written after the fact, invented to make the practice of public relations more real” (Pauly & Hutchison, 2001, p 382).

Secondly, cases chosen are sometimes famous or classic cases, which readily appeal to both students and teachers because they are well known and often dramatic. But they may represent a social, technological and management environment years or even decades away from current practice (for example much-cited but dated cases such as the Rely tampon crisis of 1980, the Tylenol product-tampering of 1982, the Bhopal chemical leak of 1984, and the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill of 1989).

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the use of case studies across the communications curriculum can mean that time constraints limit the opportunity for in-depth discussion and the cases often remain largely as historical examples rather than opportunities for extended learning.

Reflecting on these limitations, Pauly and Hutchison (2001) considered the graduate business school case method and concluded that whereas public relations cases describe what someone else did, the business school cases offer problems, not solutions, and ask students what *they* would do. While this may sometimes be true, especially of the case study approach across subjects, it should not and does not have to, represent the preferred state of the case method in communication education.

Formalised case study

The alternative to the generalised approach is detailed public relations case study analysis, which expands the application of specific case studies far beyond examples used simply to illustrate or demonstrate a particular position, and does indeed challenge participants on what they would do.

Formalised case study analysis, taught both as a discrete subject and as a specific skill, has three principal modes of operation:

- deconstructing and reviewing cases which have already been collated and described by others (either the narrative award winning style or critical analyses by third parties)
- undertaking fresh research and analysis to overlay on previously published case studies (sometimes re-examining ‘classic’ cases in the context of historical hindsight or modern practice and technology)
- researching and assembling cases from original sources (most often relating to recent or contemporary cases).

Each of these modes can be examined in the context of the literature available and how it supports the different styles.

At the same time, Stacks (2002) characterises three approaches to the published case study:

- linear – uses a sequential narrative style which suggests the case is a “self-contained” entity unique unto itself
- process-oriented – which suggests the case is but a snapshot of the larger and continuing public relations process
- grounded – in which the case is grounded within a systematic form, such as a Management By Objectives (MBO) outline or a formal strategic planning model (pp. 73-74).

By considering in parallel both the modes of operation and the styles of published cases, it is possible to distinguish the strengths and weaknesses of each and to draw conclusions about the optimal way forward.

Case study forms

At the fundamental level, a public relations case study can be entirely or largely theoretical. As Yin (1989) advised: “For teaching purposes, a case study need not reflect a complete or accurate rendition of actual events; rather, its

purpose is to establish a framework for discussion and debate among students” (p. 1).

This model is illustrated by the Harvard Business Review hypothetical case studies which are “fictional, present common managerial dilemmas and offer concrete solutions from experts”. Similarly, *Cases in public relations management* (Simon & Wylie, 1994) contains a few well known named cases, but also many which are designated “names, places and dates disguised”.

Such hypothetical or disguised cases have acknowledged value for class discussion, but anonymity effectively prevents independent student research and analysis of the specific case. Accordingly the new edition by Simon’s colleague Patricia Swann (*Cases in public relations management*, 2007) specifically avoided disguised cases. Swann said not only does such disguise deny students the opportunity to do their own research but also leaves students feeling disconnected since they don’t know the ‘true’ nature/history of these cases (personal communication, February 26, 2007). Furthermore, the disguised approach also hinders comparative analysis to determine how other authors and scholars have addressed the same case. Or indeed the perspective of the subject organisation itself, perhaps in news media statements, in published annual reports, regulatory filings, or on its own website.

Case study sources

When it comes to real-life case studies, one of the commonest and most easily accessible sources is prizewinning entries in professional association award programmes, such as the Golden Targets of the Public Relations Institute of Australia; the PRSA Silver Anvils; the IABC Gold Quills; and the Excellence Awards of the Chartered Institute for Public Relations and the Canadian Public Relations Society, some of which are made available in annual compilations or online (see www.pria.com.au; www.prsa.org; www.iabc.com; www.ipr.org.uk; www.cprs.ca).

Award entries usually follow a specified format, typically setting out the problem, the strategy, the tactics, and evaluation or outcome. (Common formats are RACE - Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation; or ROPE - Research, Objectives, Programming, Evaluation). Obviously such ‘author-generated’ cases are prone to self praise, embellishment and the wisdom of hindsight (and in the case of consultants, sometimes optimising results for their client). Furthermore, they almost invariably focus on ‘successful’ campaigns and lack independent review. (For analysis of competitive case studies from one such competition, namely the Institute of Public Relations’ Sword of Excellence Awards, see Pieczka, 2007).

However, competitive entries can still be very useful as examples of current thinking and best practice, and can provide insight into the mechanics of a range of programmes, particularly in areas such as employee/member relations, marketing communication, event management, corporate communications, publications, internal communications, Intranet and external websites, and media relations. But in less public areas of practice, including issue management, government relations and crisis management, award entries are by necessity often far less transparent and accordingly less useful as learning opportunities for other practitioners or students.

As well as existing in public relations association publications and websites, award entries are also the basis of some well known student casebook texts, including *Public relations cases* which has seen eight editions (Hendrix, 1988, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2004; Hendrix & Hayes 2007, 2009). Each revision of this popular text is based on recent PRSA award winners, divided into areas of professional practice, such as government relations, corporate communications, employee relations, internal communications and community relations.

Despite the undoubted success and longevity of this approach, a major weakness of such sources is that a formalised narrative based on the RACE/ROPE formula becomes a literary artifice which implicitly portrays every

campaign as well planned, task oriented, efficient and systematic. Or as Pauly and Hutchison (2001) commented: “The *story* of the campaign moves calmly from research to objectives, planning, execution and evaluation, even when the campaign itself stumbled in a panic from one deadline to another” (p. 385).

Furthermore, the focus on specific campaigns which are typically self-contained and easy to describe can obscure the fact that many real-life public relations problems are complex, ongoing management challenges which do not lend themselves to the award format. Moreover, winning an industry award may indicate that the process was followed and possibly that the outputs demonstrated originality, but not necessarily that there is strong learning potential. Indeed, the ‘award winning’ style seldom allows adequate consideration of alternative plans and open discussion in retrospect of what might have been done better or done differently. In addition, competitive entries in their published form most often exclude ‘actual budget costs,’ which further hinders the complete learning process.

Moving beyond the strictly award format are a number of texts where public relations cases – often award-winners – have been recreated, sometimes with the cooperation and insight of the agency or organisation directly involved. These are occasionally supported by original material such as news releases, brochures, advertisements and photographs, and pose key questions for discussion, but typically include only limited critical analysis. Typical of these are *Public relations practices: Managerial case studies and problems* (previously *Public relations practices: Case studies*) which has seen seven editions (Center, 1975; Center & Walsh, 1981, 1985; Center & Jackson, 1990, 1995, 2003; Center, Jackson, Smith & Stansberry, 2008); *Practising public relations: A case study approach* (Quarles & Rowling, 1993); *Adventures in public relations: Case studies and critical thinking* (Guth & Marsh, 2005); and *Case studies in public relations management* (Swann, 2007).

In addition to these professionally written texts there are also published case studies prepared by students, sometimes with academic supervision, such as *The business communication casebook: A Notre Dame collection* (O’Rourke, 2002), and the annual student case study competition organised by the Arthur W. Page Society. (Winning entries across different categories since 2001 can be viewed online at www.awpagesociety.com/site/resources/case_studies/).

Such sources have the advantage that they do not rely entirely upon the views of interested parties and can include strong examples of unsuccessful cases – or even famous failures – as opposed to just the typical success focus of most professional competition entries. In similar vein are *Crisis communications: A casebook approach* (Fearn-Banks, 2002) which addresses a broader range of cases within the specific area of crisis management, as does *Crisis response: Inside stories on managing image under siege* (Gottschalk, 1999) which provides perspective from executives directly involved in some well known crisis cases.

Another source that can help span between narrative and analysis is case studies in peer-reviewed journals, though these too come in a variety of forms. Some are authored or co-authored by direct participants, often focusing wholly on a specific case. Other more academic papers independently analyse a specific case in depth, though many use a case or cases to illustrate a particular development or support a hypothesis, which can limit the scope of alternative analysis. (For analysis of the nature and quality of published case studies in journals, see Cutler, 2004).

In whatever style, the optimal benefit comes not just from a retelling of the facts, but from genuinely perceptive insight (either by case participants or third parties) and by objective analysis of what was done and what might have been done. Moreover, fresh analysis of so-called classic cases with historical hindsight and in the context of modern practice and technology can add real value to contemporary understanding. For example, while Murray and Shohen (1992) describe the Tylenol tampering

incident as “the gold standard by which all crises are now viewed” (p. 15) and the *Exxon Valdez* disaster as “the classic example of what not to do” (p 19), others such as Tyler (1997), Pauly and Hutchison (2001) and Jaques (2008), have critically re-examined these iconic cases and suggest they are instructive, but not as clear cut as commonly believed. Indeed, Jaques (2009) later analysed Tylenol and *Exxon Valdez* in detail and concluded that a changing news media, legal and regulatory environment mean misleading or inappropriate lessons can easily be drawn from such cases. He proposed that “new icons” need to be identified from more recent experience.

Managing the formalised case study approach

Although the two main public relations case study methods have been widely discussed, there is only limited literature setting out implementation of a formalised case study approach in a communication context. There is extensive material available on the business case method in general, as well as established scholarship specifically on the analysis of business cases (for example Schnelle, 1967; Ronstadt, 1980; Barnes, Christenson & Hanson, 1994; Penrose, Rasperry & Myers, 1997). There is also a very extensive literature on case studies in business ethics, many with a strong public relations focus. Yet few communications scholars have published a step-by-step methodology specifically for how to analyse public relations cases (although some institutions have developed copyright syllabus material).

Among early proponents of the formalised approach were Quarles and Rowlings (1993), whose Australian text detailed a simple but very effective method to optimise the value of analysis, followed by an explicit description of how to best present that analysis clearly and persuasively, both orally and in writing. While many of their cases are based on competition winners, the incremental value they brought to the published literature is to illuminate the analytic process itself. Quarles and Rowlings counselled students that given

hindsight, full outlines of the circumstances and time without business pressures, today’s answer to the questions raised by each case “*should* be better than the practitioner’s in the first place” (p. 97).

Similarly, O’Rourke (2001) developed a public relations case analysis methodology (also reproduced in O’Rourke, 2002), while Guth and Marsh (2005) more recently developed another approach to the mechanics of case study analysis, introducing the stepwise method they called RECAP (Reverse Engineering Case Analysis Process), supported by ACT (Advanced Critical Thinking).

Ancillary to this formalised analytical conceptual are a number of recent publications which focus on a more advanced, genuinely independent analysis of public relations and communications cases, where there is a specific learning opportunity. These include *Public relations inquiry as rhetorical criticism: Case studies of corporate discourse and social influence* (Elwood, 1995); *Fifteen case studies in international public relations: Case studies from countries in transition* (Turk & Scanlon, 1999); *Public relations cases: International perspectives* (Moss & Desanto, 2002); *Applied public relations: Cases in stakeholder management* (Lamb & McKee, 2005); *Public relations issues and crisis management* (Galloway & Kwansh-Aidoo, 2005); *Case Studies in organizational communication: Ethical perspectives and practices* (May, 2006a); *International and intercultural public relations: A campaign case approach* (Parkinson & Ekachai, 2006); and *Public relations campaigns* (Sheehan & Xavier, 2009).

In each of these compilations the authors/contributors are mainly academics and, most importantly, they are provided sufficient space for proper description and analysis of significant real-life cases. In other words they are encouraged to “utilise their own scholarly strengths and expertise to develop fuller, richer cases while supplementing their expertise with additional historical and current resources” (May, 2006b, p. 14).

Furthermore, the compilation format also provides scope for broader conceptual analysis, not just of what might have been done better or

done differently, but what *should* have been done based perhaps on different normative standards of the key stakeholders, such as the community, the regulators or corporate head office. And beyond the question of what normative standard to apply, this in-depth third-party analysis can also explore questions such as the extent to which the legal/political/economic/cultural context influenced the case, or how the case might have played out in a different cultural or geographic environment.

Conclusion

These advanced compilations reinforce a key element of the formalised case study approach – namely the need for sufficient time and a logical framework to secure a full appreciation of each case, not just as an example within normal classroom discussion but in the context of structured formal analysis.

Richardson (1993) examined the management of communication case studies, particularly in relation to crises, and concluded that in contrast to the traditional uni-direction lecture method, formal case study discussion emphasises collaborative decision making, defences of positions and presentations of views, findings and decisions. He identified six specific benefits, with a strong focus on those arising from group work and formal case discussion, which he described as a ‘social process’:

- greater strategic awareness
- better understanding of and skills in the use of helpful (if abstract) concepts
- learning from previous cases as decision-making theory
- development of left- and right-brain decision-making skills
- development of empathy, communicative and group decision-making skills
- developing an ethical platform and practicing emotion-laden decision making.

While it is self-evident that some of these benefits apply much more widely than just public relations cases, it is a basic assumption of case examples that “principles of best practice may effectively be learned through examining how real organisations have chosen to develop and maintain relationships in a variety of industries, locations and settings” (Lamb & McKee, 2005, p. xiii).

However, the proposition argued in this paper is that such learning can be maximised only when case studies are examined in detail through formal analysis, which provides sufficient time and a structured framework to:

- apply communication theory in real-world situations
- reflect in depth on the actions of direct participants
- explore and develop alternative courses of action
- reinforce key concept learning through practical application
- research cases from original sources
- critique the conclusions and hypotheses of other researchers
- develop worst-case scenarios
- assess the impact on a wider range of stakeholders
- apply current attitudes, expectations and technology to past cases
- consider the case in different cultural, political and geographic contexts.

Using case study examples across the curriculum will always be a valuable component of teaching public relations. But formal, structured analysis of case studies provides the best opportunity to secure optimal learning benefits for full understanding of public relations.

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