Evaluation of the Internal and External Publics of Ball State University and its Public Relations Efforts and Needs

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PROBLEM

Maintaining constant two-way communications with each public in its constituency is the challenge of every organization which recognizes the importance of public relations in its daily functioning. Ensuring that flow of information requires constant surveying of communications processes to target points where a breakdown of communications may occur. Based on these principles, Ball State University will be analyzed as an organization utilizing public relations according to the definition of public relations developed by Dr. Melvin Sharpe, associate professor and coordinator of the Public Relations Sequence, Department of Journalism, Ball State University, Education Editor for the International Public Relations Association, Director and National Newsletter Editor for the Educator Section of the Public Relations Society of America and Chairman of the national PRSA Continuing Education Board for 1985.

DEFINITION

Public Relations is the recognition and acceptance on the part of organizations of the following principles:

1. That the economic and social stability of an organization of any type is dependent upon the attitudes and opinions of the publics within its total operational environment.

2. That all men have the right to voice their opinions in relation to decisions which will directly affect them and, therefore, have the right to accurate information about pending decisions relating to them or their welfare.
3. That an organization's management of communications is essential to ensure accurate and adequate feedback from both internal and external publics in order to assure the organization's adjustment and adaptation to change necessary for longevity.

The practice of public relations involves:

1. The constant evaluation and analysis of the operational environment and its publics.

2. The review and analysis of organizational goals, objectives, policies and procedures for the purpose of identifying lack of harmony between the organization and its publics or social environment and the potential short and long range effect.

3. The maintenance of open communications to assure the feedback necessary for management decisions based on accurate and complete information and to assure the organization's ability to respond and adjust to change as required by societal and environmental conditions.

4. The planning and development of courses of action designed to project the organization honestly and accurately in order to earn and maintain the support and understanding of the publics within the operational environment of the organization.

Organizations which fail to accept these principles or which have communications programs which fail to perform the functions stated, do not practice or perform public relations and, therefore, abuse the term and its professional intent.

They also invite the problems that result from poor communication, resistance to change, management decisions based on inadequate data, and planning and programming which is stop-gap at best and minimal in terms of long range impact.

Although public relations principles and practice can certainly be applied and used by individuals, its professional context relates to groups of individuals with shared missions performing as profit, non-profit, political, or government organizations.
METHODOLOGY

The investigation of the university's public relations practices included extensive one and a half hour interviews with several distinguished members of the Ball State University faculty and administration. Among those interviewed were the current chairman of the Department of Journalism, two past chairmen of the Department of Journalism, the former president of University Senate, the director of the Honors Program, the vice president of University Relations, coordinator of the Public Relations Sequence (Department of Journalism), a top university administrator, and the president of the university. Daily news clips from October 1982 to December 1983, external perceptions survey of Ball State University, and the April 1984 report from the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education were reviewed to provide background information.

The analysis will be organized according to subject in relation to each of the four public relations practices outlined by Dr. Sharpe.

FINDINGS

The first practice cited involves "the constant evaluation and analysis of the operational environment and its publics."

Analysis

Before this practice can be applied, it is essential that the purpose and intent of the organization be clearly defined, and its goals and objectives be established, to provide a basis for analysis.

At this basic level of understanding, Ball State University
struggles with ambiguity of purpose and lack of direction—a significant strain on the ability of a public relations program to operate effectively. The Commission of Institutions of Higher Education April 1984 report states, "There is no doubt in the minds of the examiners that 'Ball State University has clear and publicly stated purposes, consistent with its mission, and appropriate to post-secondary educational institutions.' Among the various constituents at Ball State University and within the University community, however, there is something less the unanimous agreement as to the purposes of the institution. There is a view that the institution should remain faithful to its historic mission as a teacher training school and a view that the institution should move more boldly and quickly toward becoming a comprehensive, research-oriented university. Both views have their partisans. This clash of purposes—and the resulting clash of values and visions—has led to some considerable confusion within the institution and some puzzlement beyond as to the primary purposes of Ball State University."

The report goes on to say that "members of the faculty are still intertwined in the battle of a decade ago. The reconciliation of conflicting values—a firm allegiance to an immutable past or an equally firm devotion to a changing present is, perhaps, the most formidable task facing the institution."

The problem of defining the purpose and goals of Ball State University is a major theme in the Commission's report. It is also a concern echoed in numerous interviews with faculty
and administration. Dr. Robert Linson, Vice President of University Relations, said it's a matter of "interpreting ourselves to ourselves." Dr. Conn, Chairman of the Department of Journalism, said there is need to "determine what our focus is." The university appears to be much like a mobile whose moving parts represent various departments and programs—each acting independently of the others, and seemingly bonded only by a narrow bridge of common interests, instead of united by a common purpose.

In terms of external perceptions this ambiguity extends to the public image of the university. Dr. Arno Wittig, a Ball State Psychology professor, said there isn't "one thing that means BSU." In the same tenor, Dr. Popovich, a Ball State Journalism professor, said, "There is no unified Ball State image."

Evaluation

In regard to this problem, it would be of great benefit to the university to employ a public relations professional to oversee and coordinate all the public relations efforts in various administrative offices, as well as advise in policy making, such as establishing goals and objectives of the university. Such a move would provide a cohesive effort in sound public relations practice, and ensure a means of creating university policy consistent with its goals and objectives.

Since the true practice of public relations requires that image be based on truth, the goals and objectives of the university must not only be defined, but agreed upon by faculty
and administration to establish an unity of purpose, and provide a vehicle for directing university policy. Accomplishing this task is also paramount to the success of the efforts involved in the second practice of public relations outlined by Dr. Sharpe—"The review and analysis of organizational goals, objectives, policies and procedures for the purpose of identifying lack of harmony between the organization and its publics or social environment and the potential short and long range effect."

**Identifying Lack of Harmony**

The problem of agreement on purpose and direction is instrumental in the discussion of this point. It related specifically to what the Commission on Institution of Higher Education calls "a degree of acrimony" observed by several relatively new faculty members regarding the ongoing debate over the Ball State past versus Ball State present. They said it "characterized so much of the public discourse about the university."

Teachers are a particularly noticeable group when identifying a "lack of harmony" between the university and its publics. Several faculty members commented on a kind "we/they" mentality existing between themselves and the university administrators. Dr. Popovich said, "There is a reluctance to involve faculty in anything administrative." Dr. Inglehart said, "They (administrators) have not really done well in their faculty relationships." "During the last three years, they have demonstrated an antagonism toward faculty members, and as a result, faculty morale and participation and involvement has deteriorated to disastrous levels. They (administrators) have really not
recognized the purpose of public relations which is to establish a program of continuous two-way communications so that the publics which are important to you can come to understand and perhaps identify your objectives as being compatible with the objectives of that public. Faculty is a tremendously important public."

While teachers are one of the most important publics in the university structure, there are several other publics which the university must recognize: current students, prospective students, parents, Muncie residents, local officials, state legislators, alumni, staff, and the Daily News. In regard to a discussion on the policies and procedures of the university (the last section of the second public relations practice cited) there is perhaps no incident in recent years which better illustrates the effects of university practices on the attitudes of its various publics, than the Daily News investigation of the investment practices of Ball State University. Policies and Procedures: Short and Long Range Effects

State Board of Accounts spokesman Michael Clayton and SBA director N. F. Renner termed the university practice of investing solely in local banks, "bad business." Renner said the practice could have cost the university hundreds of thousands of dollars. From several concurring views of business professors from other universities and past administrators quoted in the Daily News, the investment policy was deemed unwise. From a public relations standpoint its effects were just as far reaching.

It appears obvious that when the university adopted that policy, little attention was given to the appearance of the
situation—or the message it might be communicating. Former
president Anderson said "The conflict of interest possibility
is not a new question." "I raised the question of total local
investing when I was there as president," he said. Despite
his concern, the policy did not change.

When the investment stories began, and the ensuing legal
crashes occurred, the administration became engulfed in a flood of
public inquiry over the situation. Former president Bell said
the impact of the articles was "pretty severe." Alumni and
potential donors contacted him with questions about the issue,
he said. He wasn't sure at that point if those people would
still make donations. "One donor who gave a sizable estate
said, 'Maybe my donation was a mistake. I don't live in the
state and just saw the headlines.'"

At least in part, however, the furor caused by the issue
was due to the manner in which the administrators responded to
the investigation. Another crucial aspect of public relations
is open communications, as is documented in the third public
relations practice cited by Dr. Sharpe, "the maintenance of
open communications to assure the feedback necessary for
management decisions based on accurate and complete information
and to assure and organization's ability to respond and adjust
to change as required by societal and environmental conditions."
The administration at that time did not follow a policy of
open communications.

Open Communications

When asked by the Daily News to explain their reasoning for
engaging in such business practices, administrators balked at the student reporters saying "an answer isn't justified."

Then president Bell verbally attacked the student press several times, and even barred chief reporter Don Yeaser from his office. Dr. Inglehart said, "They established an atmosphere of confrontation which damaged them a great deal." One university administrator said, "They got defensive." "I don't think you ever win when you attack the press," Dr. Sharpe said, "even a student operated newspaper."

The important consideration reiterated in several interviews was the fact that student reporters were involved and that the student press is a learning instrument. Dr. Vander Hill, director of Honors, said one reason for the problems is the Daily News is the largest most identifiable anti-administration group on campus. One university administrator said because the Daily News is a journalistic lab experience, it should be respected but not regarded as a continuing threat to administrators. He also said through the investments issue, the administration learned that public opinion is worth something. Perhaps with this understanding the university will begin to change its policies to allow more openness in communications.

The administration has long been perceived by students and faculty as hesitant to discuss problems openly. With regard to recurring incidents of rape on campus, rumors of the number and location of rapes occurring spread rapidly. Some students said they felt the university was hiding information on the frequency of rapes, and trying to minimize the danger to women
on campus. One administrator said they should be more open in discussing problems such as this and not to try to hide so much.

**Respond and Adjust to Change as Required by Societal and Environmental Conditions**

Vice President of University Relations, Robert Linson, said it's one of the more "ticklish" aspects of public relations--"How do you handle the problem without covering it up, being factual, and informing people of potential danger to them." In regard to parents, he said, "It's a matter of confidence in the institution. Years ago we tried to hide these things. Those days are gone forever."

Apparently his view of openness is not shared by all who are concerned about receiving full disclosure of pertinent information. The question of confidence in the institution is addressed here. Confidence is a product of honesty and trust in all types of relationships. By dealing directly and openly with problems involving the security of students, financial integrity of the university, or the willingness to respect the needs and concerns of faculty, the university can build confidence in its ability to operate efficiently and in the best interest of those affected by its policies.

This is the main intent of an internal relations program, vital to the success of any organization. A public relations professional hired specifically to handle internal relations would be pivotal in easing the ongoing internal stresses of the university. A plan of continuing communications with various publics could eliminate frightened, defensive responses to serious questions, and provide a means of addressing crucial issues in a
productive manner.

Heeding this advice would be a positive step toward implementing the fourth practice of public relations stated by Dr. Sharpe: "The planning and development of courses of action designed to project the organization honestly and accurately in order to earn and maintain the support and understanding of the publics within the operational environment of the organization."

Courses of Action

Some publics are very well recognized, such as prospective students. The university does an admirable job of recruiting students. It distributes brochures, pamphlets, personalized form letters, and utilizes many other forms of communication. The problem is keeping the students here once they arrive. For a number of reasons a high percentage of students drop out of Ball State after their first year.

Disseminating information to students who do stay is another public relations struggle. Dr. Sharpe said there is not one means of communication to reach all students. You will always have those who miss information no matter how well you relay it, he said. Dr. Linson said relating to students is one of the greater weakness of the university. Dr. Popovich said it's a matter of attitude. He said sometimes students are regarded as a bother rather than recognized as the reason the university exists. It is ironic that the administration is seen as holding this attitude since one of the university's most marketed attributes is the caring attitude of faculty toward students. It sets up an interesting parallel between administrators' attitudes towards students, and relations between administration and faculty.
Among the publics favored by the university, the conservative, Republican community ranks high. Dr. Inglehart said, "they (administrators) have worked hard to ingratiate themselves to the money element." Arno Wittig also said the university makes a considerable effort to gain the support of this community. In regard to other publics such as alumni, however, Dr. Wittig said there are mixed reactions, particularly about the alumni office and the work they do. "Some people feel it's tremendous," he said. There are others who strongly disagree, he added, citing past issues of the alumni newsletter which contained appalling grammatical errors. It doesn't serve to promote the quality of Ball State University as a learning institution, he said.

Conclusions

Measuring the reactions of each public toward Ball State University is a difficult but necessary task. External studies have been conducted, but given the scope of the issues discussed, it appears the university would benefit greatly from an extensive internal study as well. At the end of each interview, the subject was asked what he would do if he had the opportunity to direct policies to eliminate some of the problems discussed. Three responses were given repeatedly. They were: 1) establish a unity of purpose 2) restructure the administration, eliminate large numbers of unnecessary positions 3) focus on improving internal relations.

Some of the suggestions involved dramatic change in university structure and policy. There appears to be no nondisruptive way to resolve some of the crucial issues facing the university. It is not to say that individuals should be treated insensitively,
however. Strong leadership is imperative in formulating the types of policies necessary to direct the university on a well thought out course. Strong leadership requires strong support, and can also evoke substantial opposition. The importance of public relations would be evident in providing a bridge between those who do not readily accept change and those who advocate change. It would also be a function of public relations to encourage the administration to engage in continuous communications with its various publics to explain new policies.

Continuous two-way communications is the key to the success of any public relations program. A planned program of internal and external relations should be adopted to serve the extensive communications needs of the university. A public relations professional employed to oversee all of the public relations efforts handled by various offices, and to advise administrators in policy making, would provide the cohesion necessary to implement coordinated, effective policies in attaining the goals of the outlined programs. Confidence in the university would be increased through open communication, and a program for handling crises would eliminate rash or defensive responses.

It is imperative that administrators be advised on the importance of public relations in regard to themselves as well as the university. The manner in which they propose and implement policy is critical in acquiring and maintaining the degree of support they need to carry out their functions in the university. There is a great deal of optimism that the new president can establish a forum for open communications to improve university relations at
all levels. A commitment to a sound program of public relations must begin with his office. Since maintaining two-way communications is a challenge to every organization, the new president can affect change to maintain the necessary channels of communication. He can—if he accepts the challenge.