

1998

Conceptualizing the Academic Event: Blending Theory, Practice and Public Relations

Andrea M. J. Luoma
Washington State University

Denney G. Rutherford
Washington State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions>

Recommended Citation

Luoma, Andrea M. J. and Rutherford, Denney G. (1998) "Conceptualizing the Academic Event: Blending Theory, Practice and Public Relations," *Visions in Leisure and Business*: Vol. 16 : No. 4 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions/vol16/iss4/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Visions in Leisure and Business* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

**CONCEPTUALIZING THE ACADEMIC EVENT: BLENDING THEORY,
PRACTICE AND PUBLIC RELATIONS**

BY

DR. ANDREA M. J. LUOMA

**HOTEL AND RESTAURANT ADMINISTRATION
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
PULLMAN, WASHINGTON 99164-4742**

AND

DR. DENNEY G. RUTHERFORD

**HOTEL AND RESTAURANT ADMINISTRATION
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
PULLMAN, WASHINGTON 99164-4742**

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the conceptualization, design and execution of a unique academic event that serves several audiences. The business theory planning, aspects of public relations, and meetings as a communication medium is used describe the event. Also addressed is the evolution and design of this academic event that provides the structure for industry to industry; industry to student; student to industry; university to industry; industry to university; student to potential employer and employer to university interaction.

INTRODUCTION

Oftentimes the public relations scope can be much greater than the intended mission or purpose of the event, meeting, or convention. The ability to capitalize on these unrealized public relations opportunities is

the central focus of the event discussed here. Because, according to Goldblatt (3), “[special] events...can ultimately increase attendance, generate positive public relations, focus attention [and] aid in retention of information...” they can serve multiple roles in an academic environment.

The overarching goal of any academic program is to create a national reputation based on highly qualified faculty, solid academic requirements, successful graduates, and the creation of a mutually beneficial relationship with industry. One way to accomplish the latter is through the academy’s support of the contemporaneous discussion and analysis of pertinent issues. Carefully designed events are a vehicle to provide this linkage, and can be used to accomplish the aforementioned goals.

THEORY

Goals, according to Stoner (7) are the first step in any business planning process. Without definition of goals, the event may become too broad and lack a clear focus. Goldblatt (3), reinforces this by stating that, "Positive lasting publicity could be generated through the use of special events by carefully designing your goals." He continues that goals should reflect your message, the market, and the results you wish to achieve. Finally, from the public relations literature, Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1), refer to planning theory as it relates to environmental scanning. They agree with goal setting as the necessity to proactively direct and avoid routine repetition of activities. They expand the concept of planning through monitoring of the environment. Thus, meeting and event planning is a combination of the functional, pragmatic application of business planning theory and public relations theory.

The relationship between business planning and public relations theory can be seen in figure one.

The above combined theory and stated goal may be related to Washington State University's Hotel and Restaurant Administration Annual Chain Restaurant Management Conference. This conference provides the vehicle for industry to industry; industry to student; student to industry; university to industry; industry to university; student to potential employer and employer to university interaction. This specific event is comprised of a career fair; a roster of industry "best practices" presentations; student service dramas; networking venues and professional development activities. This is all accomplished in a two-day event that attracts a national industry audience.

Contributing to the overarching goal, additional benefits are: providing and benefiting from positive public relations opportunities not only for the targeted industry market, but also within the local business community, the central administration of the university, the state legislature and the national industry and academic media. The Chain Restaurant Management Conference has the added benefit of making clear to industry the strength of the connection between theory and practice.

The business environment of the international chain restaurant food service segment is fluid and volatile. One of the challenges is to identify a current issue or set of issues pervasive and topical enough to have a national appeal to industry. Rather than the typical lists of publics (employees, stockholders, customers/consumers, analysts, community groups, government officials, and so on), it is important to remember the issue(s) is defined on the basis of the connection to the industry in a particular situation. To accomplish this, content analysis of the trade and popular literature is done cooperatively between faculty and national media experts. Academic literature is of little value at this juncture due to the lag time between concept and publication.

Before developing a set of actions (final program planning), the decision must be made regarding which factors in the internal and external environments can help or hinder the organization in reaching its goals. These may involve budget issues; industry, participant and staff schedules; and internal and external politics.

According to Broom and Dozier (1), a successful [target market] effort must also determine each of the publics' media sources and communication networks. There are a

many industry events and programs that take place on a regular and timely basis. It is critical to obtain media and/or successful institutional/organization coverage to ensure representation and participation in the event. In attempt to ensure media coverage, an important consideration is to involve targeted media (at whatever level of coverage you are pursuing) in a role in the event.

According to Stoner (7), the final step in the planning process involves developing various alternative courses of action to reach the desired goals. For this annual event, the basic structure remains substantially the same; yet, is adapted depending on previously determined aids and barriers, the situational analysis of the environment, and evaluation of the preceding event.

HISTORY

Initially conceptualized in 1986, the conference was developed as a means of investigating and dealing with strategic issues in Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) management. WSU also wanted to establish a specialty in QSR management, outside and in addition to its mainstream hospitality curriculum. The intent was to support our academic instruction interests, specifically regarding the management of fast service operations. To this end, following the first annual conference, WSU designed and added a class in multi-unit management to the Hotel and Restaurant Administration academic curriculum.

In 1993, it became obvious that issues and strategies applied to food service areas broader than QSR establishments. In that year, the focus was changed to deal with all chain restaurant operations, including:

QSRs, family, buffet, specialty, mid-level, fine dining, and managed services.

Following the 11th annual conference, in 1996, "strategic issues" was dropped from the title of the conference; and it was named for Professor Emeritus Donald I. Smith. This recognized Smith's substantial contributions to both academia and industry, and his philosophical emphasis on bridging the two entities. The addition of Smith's name to the title of the conference created a public relations benefit based on his national reputation for having dual careers as an entrepreneur and chain executive, and being an academician at several top schools.

EVENT COMPONENTS

Industry Presentations

Presentations are made by executive management from prominent chain restaurant food service firms. Due to the nature of the audience and the size, presentations allow for candor and honesty at a greater level than typical conference presentations. Topics vary annually depending on the conference theme, and executive availability. These presentations create the basis for generating the public relations activity between and among the other components.

Audience

The audience consists of industry representatives from small business and chain sectors in the region; the majority is mid-level managers and operators. National chain restaurant recruiters also make up a significant portion of the audience. Finally, WSU students from a variety of majors make up the remaining portion of the audience.

Chain Restaurant Students

A featured part of the program is the ability of the audience to "return to the classroom" through a presentation given by current chain restaurant students. During the preceding semester, students in the Multi-Unit Management course focus on a single issue that becomes the theme of the conference and core of their presentation. One of the things that makes this unique is the students carry out the research one semester and follow it up with a conference presentation the following semester.

This presentation is always a lively and entertaining portion of the conference and allows industry representatives to get a feel for the current campus and HRA program activities and philosophies. This presentation also plays a significant role for many industry representatives who have never actively observed a hospitality education program in practice before. Response is heard over and over that they will return, or a representative of their firm will return, to maintain the connection between industry and academia. The student presentation also allows chain recruiters to view students in action in a different light than an interview setting.

Students also serve as hosts for executive presenters. They utilize these opportunities to learn more about individual companies and create career-networking contacts.

Career Night

This event takes advantage of creating a mutually beneficial opportunity for the recruiters in the audience to obtain a professional development conference experience and Continuing Education Units, as well as interview potential new hires.

Recruiters have had a more significant role in the actual conference program in recent years, sitting on panel discussions, and explaining how the industry continues to change on a regular basis, from an employee perspective.

On the evening of the first day of the conference, representatives from 25 firms, set up company display booths with samples of their products available for career searching participants. This results in recruiting contacts for both the initial career steps, and internship placements.

Pre-Conference VIP Reception and Dinner

This reception and dinner is conceived and presented by students from Food Service Systems laboratory students; thus, allowing for interaction with another component of the student population and demonstrates a further dimension of the curriculum. This event hosts the industry executive speakers, recruiters, student hosts, national media, faculty and members of the university administration.

What can be Learned from our Experience

The way in which all components are leveraged is what creates the unique features of this event.

1. Audience size, the intimacy of setting, and a deeply involved moderator creates an atmosphere which allows executives to speak candidly about strengths, weakness, failures, and issues. It also encourages dialog between and among executives, students and faculty.

2. Increasingly, HRA alumni who have established careers in chain restaurants return to campus for this event, providing another channel to keep in touch with former students. Alumni are also often included on the program in a "tell it like it is" panel for current students.
3. The national focus and stature of the conference has drawn the attention of the top administrators from the university's central administration. Typically, the university President or Provost welcome the audience participants and participate in some conference events.
4. The national focus is seen as newsworthy due to the currency of issues presented. This creates a stronger tendency for media coverage. A further media attraction is to include editors and reporters on the program in roles to support the topics, e.g. as discussion moderators, or through a press conference with the industry executives. Another example of newsworthiness is that several of the industry presenters are recipients of or represent firms which have received prestigious industry awards within the past year.
5. Development (fund raising) activities are a major benefit from a properly conceived and executed event. Industry likes to see the clear connection between classroom "theory" and practice and have found financial ways to support various aspects of the program.
6. Washington State University's HRA program was the beneficiary of the first ever Taco Bell Distinguished Professor endowment in recognition of the emphasis on chain restaurant management. This gift generated widespread international attention for the program.
7. The continuous bridging between academia and industry has created gifts in support of an endowment for the conference. Such sponsorship gifts create a snowball effect, with more and more firms interested in participating in supporting the event, as well as the program.

CONCLUSION

Most planners, by virtue of their training and experience will instinctively utilize most of these components discussed in this paper. What we believe is important is the melding of more than one theoretical perspective to generate maximum competitive advantage. Persistence and finding the correct niche to leverage is what creates maximum public relations exposure, institutional benefit, and positive industry relationships and interaction.

REFERENCES

1. G. M. Broom and D. M. Dozier, Using Research in Public Relations: Applications to Program Management, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, pp. 21-47, 1990.

2. S. M. Cutlip, A. H. Center, and G. M. Broom, Effective Public Relations, 6th Ed., Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, pp. 199-310, 1985.
3. J. J. Goldblatt, Special Events Spell Profits. In Steven H. Blackwell, (Ed) Fundamentals of Association Management: Conventions, American Society of Association Executives, Washington, DC, pp.156-180, 1985.
4. Hotel and Restaurant Administration. (1986-1992). Strategic Issues in Fast Service, Annual Conference. (Issues 1-7). [Brochure]. Pullman, WA: Washington State University.
5. Hotel and Restaurant Administration. (1993-1995). Strategic Issues in Chain Restaurant Management, Annual Conference. (Issues 8-10). [Brochure]. Washington State University, Pullman, Washington.
6. Hotel and Restaurant Administration. (1996-1998). Donald I. Smith Chain Restaurant Management Conference. (Issues 11-13). [Brochure]. Washington State University, Pullman, Washington.
7. J. A. F. Stoner and C. Wankel. (1986). Management, 3rd Ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc, pp. 85-95.

Figure 1

Combined Business Planning & Public Relations Theory

