

2. Shippensburg U (Penna) has a functioning pr firm -- Shippensburg Partners -- in its 3rd semester. Previous clients include American Ameranth, Carlisle Theatre Project. Students are currently **developing proposals for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Susquehanna River Life Celebration Day** -- a late June event expected to draw over 10,000 people.

PR firm has 6 committees: media/gov't rels, special events, research, feature writing/internal marketing, publications, creative design. "This method of teaching is more effective than some traditional methods. It's real-life, hands-on experience in a lab setting," explains Richard Gibbs, assoc prof.

## DANGER IN USING THE NICKNAME "PR"? SEMANTICS IS POSITIONING

Sam Black (London), text author, teacher, longtime head of IPRA, writes pr: "I am convinced that this question, while small in itself, has a profound effect on the public perception of our profession, and hides our advance to acceptance as a management discipline."

In an article on the subject he writes: "To a politician, PR means 'proportional representation.' To a doctor, it means application 'per rectum.' To a public relations professional, every time the short form PR is used in speech or in print it is a negative factor dividing us from public acceptance as a true profession."

"The use of PR probably originated as a nickname for press relations but unfortunately when public relations developed in the United States the habit of using PR spread into the new professional field. [Ed note: this is the first reference we've seen to this etymology] Some of the worst offenders in this regard are senior professionals who thus set a very bad example to their juniors & newcomers to the profession."

"I have devoted effort to persuading public relations teachers in Britain to make sure that their students avoid picking up this sloppy undesirable habit. My insistence is bearing fruit but unfortunately sometimes there is backsliding."

"Does any profession, trade or industry, other than ours, use initials to describe its activities & work? There is none [except hr]. In the global village, everybody recognizes a doctor, a politician, an accountant, a lawyer, a priest or a public relations practitioner. Why confuse everybody by calling yourself a PR? Apart from the way in which the use of this nickname denigrates our calling, it is a free gift to our critics who can use the expression: 'Just a pr exercise' with great effect."

In the early 80s, pr brought this issue forward -- especially since "pr" is used in our name & as a space saver in articles. Consideration was given to changing, but a readership survey showed the current name to be preferred. **Is it time to rethink?** How about "Strategic Public Relations(ships)" or just "Public Relationships"? *Suggestions solicited.*

## HI TECH PINNACLE, VIRTUAL REALITY, READY FOR PR USES

Star Trek isn't a novelty anymore. Artificial intelligence is thriving, even in public relations (pr 4/12, 4/26). It will change the way we do business...for many, it already has. Now comes Virtual Reality -- where you interact with a simulated environment & simulated objects as if they were real.

VR's effects will be widespread, touching & changing such areas as selling, education, training, entertainment, design, work...& maybe communications...certainly research...or even impersonal relationship-building (if that isn't a technical as well as verbal oxymoron).

### HOW IT WORKS

- 1) A **helmet** ("eyephones") holds two small tv monitors & a sensor that can translate movements of the head into data that goes to the computer & changes the scene being looked at;
- 2) **glove** that allows the wearer to touch & move objects in the environment;
- 3) **full bodysuits** are being worked on in Calif which would allow the whole person to jump into the environment.

"It's as if you were in there," Tim Barto, Institute for Simulation & Training, U of Central Fla, told pr. The resolution isn't like watching a tv show. "It ranges from extremely crude up to what looks like a computer graphic. But your brain doesn't care. You're so immersed in that environment your mind believes that's where it is." Now there's even a VR sound system so if you turn your head the sound adjusts. "It's total immersion."

"You know an idea is realistic when it becomes the subject of a cartoon. Doonesbury recently showed a fellow from the Home Shopping Show knocking at the door and he says 'Here, we have this latest Virtual Reality helmet. Now you can walk around our showroom in the comfort of your home.'"

### SOME USES

"Since infancy, we have learned about the world by experiencing it in 3D space; as humans, we are uniquely suited to this method of learning," explains IST's literature. VR expands people's range of experiences -- as well as their capabilities for interaction -- "by permitting the networking of many systems & participants together in a shared space." It will likely become a **"dominant method for accessing information"** in the next century." Areas it will touch include:

- **Medicine:** "Much of medical imaging is already in digital form, like a CAT scan. They can put that in a VR system. Then the radiologist puts on the goggles & here's a virtual patient laid out in front of him. He can take the beams of radiation, crawl all around inside this virtual



body, grab a radiation beam & aim it exactly. This goes into the computer so when the real patient is put in the same spot, the computer aims that radiation beam precisely." U of NC is doing research.

● **Commercial:** A Japanese company is renting space at Hechingers Department Store (DC) selling a kitchen remodeling service. Using the helmet & glove, customers design the kitchen they want by moving appliances, counters, windows & experiencing the room before it's built.

● **Training:** 1) Military uses it for pilot simulation & mission rehearsal. "The system is so real they can do things they just couldn't practice before." It's also cost effective & environmentally safe. 2) Emergency personnel (fire, police, disaster relief) use it to develop skills needed to handle disasters or life threatening situations.

● **Education:** Students can visit a philosopher in ancient Greece, learn about the Revolutionary War by talking to George Washington, or become the size of DNA molecules.

● **Entertainment:** The "movies" of the future will be total 3D experiences, where you are a part of the action and can change the direction of the story. Already there's a game called Pterodactyls that's being testmarketed. Two players don helmets to shoot at each other & at a pterodactyl that will swoop down & pick you up if you don't get it first. A Prime Time Live reporter had to remove his helmet because the sensation of falling was too real.

● **Design:** New products can be sculpted in free space & tested for fit & ease of use. Architects can experience the spatial & acoustic qualities of their buildings before construction.

● **Work:** Meetings & remote work can be conducted by uniting participants in a common 3D space.

**POSSIBILITIES FOR PR**

- a) Events, exhibits & displays, meetings, trade shows, open houses are obvious;
- b) employee orientation or training, where they could have conversations with the founder or be with a customer actually using products/services;
- c) make 1-way information transfer more effective;
- d) let research subjects experience the situation about which they're being questioned;
- e) letting media experience what they're writing about (would they accept VR?);
- f) showing management what's really happening....

Possibilities seem limitless. [Send your ideas, for sharing with prr readers]

**USAGE NOW WIDE OPEN**

VR "can run on a high powered desktop PC." And is becoming affordable. "About 2 yrs ago you'd have spent \$200,000 to get into it. Now, some of our grad students have built their own glove from a racquet ball glove, put sensors on it and

run it on a desktop PC. The helmet is still expensive, but the apparatus is just a fraction of what it was." Tho VR is in its infancy, "many different disciplines are looking at it because it applies to just about anything."

**BUT -- VR IS A MEDIUM**

And like all media its major impact may be longterm, by framing issues & attitudes. Says Michael Moshell, dir of IST's visual systems lab: "Virtual Reality will allow people to go anywhere, build anything they can imagine -- making it **the first technology that can compete with tv for our children's minds.**" (More info: 407/658-5069; fax 407/658-5059)

**PR STUDENT FIRMS: OPPORTUNITY IN TIME OF LIMITED BUDGETS**

About half the 178 PRSSA chapters operate pr firms so students get practical, in-the-field training...benefiting themselves **but also their clients.** Here are 2 examples of PRSSA resourcefulness. Could your organization, or one you know, benefit by linking with a local PRSSA group?

1. Florida International University's PRSSA chapter is putting together a "user-friendly, hands-on booklet to **help South Florida residents before, during & after the next hurricane inevitably hits the area,**" Bill Adams, prof, told prr. Funded by Weyerhaeuser, it's a "combination of corporate professionals, students & educators working on a common socially-significant project."

Weyerhaeuser agreed to fund \$10k even tho it doesn't have a big presence in S. Florida. Grant is set up so PRSSA gets \$5k, remaining \$5k is put into a special "professional development fund" for project's co-advisors. Fund is administered by the university. "It's a nice example of corporate/education cooperation on an **actual project** -- not just a 'contribution.'"

Along with the opportunity to produce something practical & informative, 8 students working on the handbook will be rewarded financially, "possibly in the form of mini-scholarships to help with books & tuition."

Students are now looking for printing partners -- offering it "free to Home Depot, FP&L, Blockbuster, hospitals, whomever" and giving credit to whichever organizations choose to do a printing. Plan is to have it out before hurricane season in late Spring.

Students' experience is not without real-world competition. "Miami Herald just unveiled its major hurricane preparedness book. For \$20. But you have to write for it and it takes 6-8 weeks for delivery. So I think we still have a leg up on getting information out on ours."

Students are involved in data collection, writing, editing, looking for corporations/other org'ns to fund its printing. Students met their "drop-dead writing date" of the first week in May -- and "who ever does that?" Adams asks.