

Research: Are practitioners practicing what professors preach... or giving management what it wants?

By Michelle Speck

A growing concern among educators is whether the practitioners in communication fields are utilizing research strategies as much as universities are stressing the importance to students. Interviews with professors and practitioners from journalism, public relations, advertising and marketing showed the difference between their positions on the importance of research.

Practical application of academic theories seems more prevalent in the fields of advertising and marketing research.

Ball State alumnus Brad Boyd (MA '83), manager of advertising and marketing communications at Walker Research Inc., in Indianapolis, is surprised by the utilization of the vast amount of research that is actually done by marketing and advertising firms, which comprise much of his client list.

"The trend today is for a company to have its own market consultants with skills in research techniques. Although this downsizes the efforts and opportunities for research companies like Walker Research to act as company research extensions, the demand is still there. Many companies do go outside their company for help in field research," Boyd said.

Because information is a management tool, research results are used by executives of companies in the marketing industry as a means for more informed

Pat Jackson, the senior counsel for Jackson, Jackson and Wagner, a public relations firm in New Hampshire, is frustrated by the slow acceptance of research in public relations.

"The shame of public relations practitioners is they do not use research. But there is an arising interest," Jackson said

Jackson said the great misunderstanding among public relations practitioners is the fact that their research is not market research and it does not have to be quantitative.

"We need qualitative research instead of quantitative. Qualitative is better for our field," Jackson said. To Jackson, research means observation and application.

"Public relations is useless unless it influences behavior."

He cited a scenario in which one researcher a selected sample to survey their opinions and finds only a small percentage is giving their actual behavior. "But it is the gut instincts of those few percent who do behave that is the very valuable piece of researched information."

Public relations can use and benefit from informal research as well, according to Jackson. If practitioners would realize and understand this, he said, then the field could start to make a quick transition in to using

more research you do, the better the judgment you can make about a case."

Adams and Rinehart, in New York City, is involved in corporate and financial investment relations and emphasizes qualitative over quantitative research. Senior associate Brad Wilkes(x,84) says for new businesses, Adams and Rinehart does research out in the field to determine the perceptions of the company. This research gathers background information and does not emphasize statistical correctness. Publication audits are another method the firm uses.

"Research is a very valuable tool that is significantly under-utilized in the PR profession," Wilkes said.

He contends that most public relations practitioners deal with top executives who are numbers people.

"But public relations is a different field, a soft science, where significantly correct research is a means to an end. Top management needs the perception of the public, not the specifics, in order to make executive decisions."

Sharpe agrees. "Public relations needs to be able to give predictions through research. They need to identify the best indicators and put those indicators together so

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Results from other public relations practitioners don't paint such a gloomy outlook for research. There are those doing more than a token amount of research, such as Cohen & Wolfe, a division of Burson-Marsteller, in New York City.

Gardi Impema (x, '84), senior account executive of the Hasbro account, says her company uses the computer data base NEXIS to retrieve most all of the information they need to help a client.

"It's our primary research resource. However, we do field research if it fits the need of the client."

She finds many companies have in-house research capabilities and do not need these services.

"But those that expect research, expect lots of it and are open to any form, so long as it gathers information," Impema said.

Types of research conducted by Impema's firm include telephone interviews and personal interviews with top editors and media who cover a client or have an association with the client to determine their perceptions of the client. Cohen & Wolfe will tabulate the circulation and audience reach figures for all the publications of a firm to determine public attitudes, for example.

"Research is a mechanism to gain publicity and press material which is the goal of the client. The

results to help them make the best decisions," Sharpe said.

He stresses the difficulty in researching trends in public opinion and accurately predicting those trends. Organizational social environments are much more complex due to specialization of internal groups, population growth, international interdependency and advancements in communication technology.

There is also journalism's use of research, which falls even below that of public relations. Gene Polinski is a deputy managing editor for *USA Today* and a Ball State alumnus (BS '72).

"Not enough attention is given to research among journalists. Because of time limitations, *USA Today* reporters rely on information retrieval systems like NEXIS to gather the facts instead of doing research about the topic they are covering."

Dr. Mark Popovich, journalism professor at Ball State, says there is one thing preventing the media from utilizing research more fervently.

"The media have one main goal and that is to maintain the system. Their primary incentive is to make money. When they are maintaining the status quo, there is no real need to change and no need for applied or academic research."

This type of thinking hurts research-oriented journalism schools. Practitioners are skeptical of the writing skills of graduates from research schools. So students must get practical experience through internships in order to demonstrate their writing skills to employers.

An interdisciplinary approach to public relations research has been proposed by Sharpe.

"There is a need to develop new models and concepts that evolve from different disciplines such as the social sciences, business and communications. If we could take action on improving our models and indicators, a comprehensible evaluation can take place in the social environment. This will allow us to more accurately assess public opinion trends."

Until a new attitude toward research is engrained and embraced by professionals, academicians will go on teaching the importance of research while some practitioners will continue to take for granted this powerful tool for improving judgment and decisions.

Ball State administers Nixon National Journalism Writing Award

Ball State University will administer the Nixon Newspapers, Inc., National Writing Award, which is the successor to the National Journalism Award, first presented in 1960 by Ball State University.

Dr. Beverley Pitts has been named administrator of the award and Nixon Newspapers, Inc. has granted Ball State approximately \$5,000 per year for the administration process.

The winner will receive a \$1,000 cash award and a lectureship to take place on the Ball State campus in April.

According to Pitts, 82 entries from magazines and newspapers nationwide have been received.

Judges for this year's competition include Bill Brashler, a freelance writer and columnist for the

Chicago *Sun-Times*, Bill Norton of the *Kansas City Star* and the 1985 winner of the award, and Nancy Shulins, a staff member of the Associated Press in New York.

Members of the Nixon liaison who will work with Pitts in administering the program are Ray Moscovitz, publisher of the *Wabash, Ind. Plain-Dealer*, and Jack Howey, editorial director of *Nixon Newspapers*.

Barry Michael Cooper, a free-lance writer, won the 1987 National Journalism Writing Award. His winning article appeared in *Spirin* magazine and dealt with growing up black in Baltimore's street drug scene.