



Site Visit: Public Relations Practice at Blue Cross-Blue Shield Louisiana

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ABSTRACT

For this piece, I visited Blue Cross-Blue Shield of Louisiana (BCBSLA) to get a feel for its public relations operation. In an on-site personal interview, corporate communications writer Robin Mayhall described the general operations of the company and walked me through the research, strategy, and tactics as practiced by BCBSLA. Though largely descriptive of the BCBSLA PR process, this work also demonstrates how public relations theory works its way into practice, though acknowledgement by practitioners of their use of theory is far more subtle than that which we see in academic writing.

KEYWORDS:

Public Relations, PR Strategy, PR Tactics, PR Theory, Health Care

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I. Background

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana is a not-for-profit company that provides health insurance and is based in Baton Rouge, LA. There are 39 independent Blue Cross companies nationwide and each has several different divisions subdivided into departments. In Baton Rouge the public relations department has a corporate communications manager who works with communications writers, graphic designers, and web practitioners to communicate important information with several key publics: employers, providers, producers (brokers) and customers. Community relations practice at BCBSLA is separate from public relations and is a part of the finance department (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010).

BCBSLA has no shareholders and as a result does not pay any dividends. One of the frequent PR problems that arise is misconception of BCBSLA services among publics. Many of these misconceptions come from customers not understanding bills or other communications related to their accounts. Some of the misconceptions, however, come from smear campaigns by hospitals who wish to charge BCBSLA more for services provided (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010).

The public relations function of Blue Cross-Blue Shield is a hybrid of hierarchal and network structure, yet more on the network side. Much of the issues management function is done in-house, but practitioners may also seek information on how other BCBSLA locations may have dealt with similar issues (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010)

For this site visit I contacted Robin Mayhall, APR, who has been practicing PR for BCBSLA for seven years. Robin received a degree from UT-Austin in journalism with a concentration in public relations.

I definitely learned two-thirds of what I know from working rather than academics, although when it comes to theory and research and the numbers side of things, I learned a lot about that in school. When I went through the accreditation process a few years ago, it was a great refresher. (Mayhall, personal interview, October 7, 2010)

Robin's education background had a place in our discussion. Education through Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) appeared to be significantly more important for her, though it is not required for practice at BCBSLA. The importance she places on accreditation comes from her desire for greater professionalism in PR practice, and she argues that accreditation is the proper path for this.

II. Strategy

Public relations practice at Blue Cross-Blue Shield is very proactive. Practitioners have several valuable resources that make this possible: a marketing department that does extensive public opinion research, a customer service center, and specialists from the various fields of their publics (employers, providers, and producers) employed by BCBSLA. Databases as well as PR and healthcare conferences play a role in BCBSLA research. "We do a lot of secondary research

looking at each other's results from different projects [e.g. websites]" (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010).

The marketing department conducts various types of surveys (telephone, Internet, mail) as well as focus groups. Some research addresses advertising recall and customer satisfaction with BCBS services. A good deal of the research comes through the customer service center, but some primary research is also outsourced to survey companies through the department (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010).

Research at BCBSLA is mostly quantitative. BCBSLA PR practitioners rely heavily on surveys and some content analysis of news media. According to Robin, "We don't do as much research as I would like but we still do more research than any other company I have ever worked for, basing some of our work on real numbers and real measurable objectives" (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010).

PR strategy is directly related to goals, many of which come from management decisions. "It can be communication but sometimes it can even be changing a business process." She cited as an example what she called "step therapy," which was a means of encouraging the use of generic rather than name-brand drugs. When filling a prescription, customers were required to try a generic version of the drug for one month. Unfortunately, problems arose when some customers picked up their prescription after hours, when the BCBSLA customer service center was closed. They were upset the pharmacist had given them a generic drug, and unable to call to find out what was going on with their prescription coverage. BCBSLA decided, rather than immediately addressing the issue from a PR standpoint, to allow customers 5 days of the name brand drug so they would have time to understand the step therapy policy before accepting a generic. The PR function assisted in this business change by contacting the pharmacies first to let them know of the change, then by contacting the customers to explain the situation (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010).

Positioning strategy is explicitly defined in the communications plan for *Our Home, Louisiana 2010*. Its approach is to position BCBSLA as "committed to supporting the health and well-being of Louisianans," as an "advocate for the people of Louisiana," and as "a Louisiana-owned and -operated company [that] understands the unique needs of the people of this state" (p. 2).

In implementing strategy, Mayhall regularly uses process models, particularly ROPE and RACE. "I like to think of PR as a 4-step process ... ROPE is one, RACE is another ... in the simplest terms, if you do the research step right, you can almost repeat the exact same step for your evaluation." This refers to looking for differences in before and after surveys. The *before* surveys yield information on which to base goals and objectives. The *after* surveys allow them to measure how well they have achieved these objectives. "If you didn't do a good job, and the numbers are not better, then your communications tactics failed for whatever reasons." Content analysis also serves to evaluate communication tactics. Robin noted that front page coverage in local newspapers is far more valuable than coverage in obscure publications in other countries (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010).

I offered a hypothetical situation for Robin to address from a BCBSLA public relations standpoint: a change in BCBS policy to cover expensive operations (e.g. triple bypass surgery) overseas with equally-qualified yet lower-priced doctors. How would her department handle such a situation? She noted that the business change would be a management decision, and members of the senior management team would announce it to marketing and other departments. The PR department would then do research and probably talk to other companies who had been in similar situations. They have quarterly meetings with advisory groups who represent the various publics to find out how publics would respond to changes in policy and communication. BCBSLA has over 200 doctors and nurses employed, as well as several former brokers, so by simply asking their employees in the field how others in the field would react to such changes, the PR department can gauge how their communications may affect their various publics.¹ The department would then write a communications plan to address each of the publics in appropriate manners (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010).

III. Tactics

In public relations, the term “tactics” refers to means of reaching publics. The BCBSLA marketing department does extensive research on how customers prefer to be contacted. As I sat in the lobby at BCBS before our interview, I thumbed through a selection of literature (printed on handbills and refrigerator magnets) produced by the PR department. All pieces carried a tagline (“The Power of You!”), simple graphic design, and information to push the reader toward the BCBSLA website.

Companies find that reaching people through electronic means saves money on printing and postage. Yet, “over 45% of our members are telling us they want to get plain old mail...other folks say the company should save money on printing and postage ... but a lot of them don’t have Internet access or a computer in their homes.” Despite the fact the Internet has diffused to most of the U.S., mail continues as an important vehicle for communication (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010).

Due to privacy issues, BCBSLA has not adopted Facebook or Twitter as a means of 2-way communication with publics. AETNA, as Mayhall tells me, has tried to use Twitter, but the majority of their responses to customers have been to offer an 800 number. Legal and ethical issues prevent them from discussing private health matters online (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010).

Inbound customer service calls also assist PR practitioners by collecting data on why the customers are calling. Trends in service complaints point to a lack of communication between BCBS and the customers, and the PR department can get on these issues, set a communication goal, and select the appropriate means of reaching the customer based on demographic and psychographic data. Some issues may require a personalized letter whereas others may require contacting large numbers of people (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010).

¹ Quarterly meetings also allow BCBSLA to test advertising on a small group of customers before delivering it to publics.

Tactics are determined by the goals that BCBSLA wishes to accomplish. In the *Our Home, Louisiana 2010* plan, general tactics include mass communication as well as targeted communication. The actual tactics vary by public, with internal e-mails, lobby posters, canned food and school supply collection, and t-shirts aimed at employees, while newsletters, opportunities to participate in booths at local events, and Televox phone calls are aimed at producers and government officials.

IV. Use of Theory

Ledingham (2003) notes that researchers are increasingly taking note of the composition of organization-public relationships, as well as how those relationships are tied to public perception. Understanding the nature of such relationships assists in making them manageable. Ledingham (2003) argued that “effectively managing organization-public relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics” (p. 190). Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig (1995) further that it is actually the relationships with publics that influence and even determine the goals and mission of an organization.

Ledingham (2003) offers several axioms to the theory of relationship management. Most noteworthy are that relationships between organizations and publics are transactional, dynamic, goal-oriented, have antecedents and consequences, are driven by needs and wants, and are expressed in interactions that involve communication. Just as in our interpersonal communication, one of the strategies for cultivating strong organization-public relationships is through two-way communication.

Indeed, for Robin, 2-way communication with customers is a very important part of her practice. “I believe in 2-way communication and being a mediator between the publics we serve and the organization: bringing what the public has to say to my boss as much as bringing the company’s words back out to the public” (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010). This comment suggests Robin subscribes to the relational perspective of public relations as described by Ledingham (2003). She recognizes the central role of relationships in PR, she conceptualizes PR as a management function intricately attached to changes in business practices (see the step-therapy situation), identifies the public relations function as connected to public opinion, and operates from a model that accommodates antecedents, process, and consequences related to the relationship between BCBSLA and its publics.

Moreover, the company itself recognizes the importance of managing relationships with publics. Though communication is a key strategy in maintaining relationships, “The proper focus of the domain of public relations,” Ledingham (2003) argues, “is relationships, not communication” (p. 195). As mentioned earlier, BCBSLA also has quarterly meetings among providers and producers to address internal issues and get feedback. Though Robin downplayed her use of theory in practice, it was apparent that she does operate in line with many of the axioms included in Ledingham (2003) theory of relationship management.

I don’t think any of our in-house practitioners have a lot of experience with really getting into theory ... when I got my APR I got a really great refresher course in some of that

stuff ... I do read a lot of articles on advertising and communication theory ... I can definitely say that I've had situations trigger memories of communication theories and they certainly led to discussions and talking to other people ... whether I could name the theory I'm thinking of is something else entirely. (R. Mayhall, personal communication, October 7, 2010)

PR practitioners at BCBSLA may not be conscious of incorporating theory into their work, but it is apparent that it is in action.

As Ledingham (2003) noted, the heuristics of relationship management theory are varied, and "today's public relations graduates are entering a world in which an understanding of management processes is increasingly considered a necessary part of the practitioner's skill set" (p. 193). BCBSLA offers an excellent example from which students can learn that although theory is at work among practitioners, it is not always discussed or addressed in the same terms we use in the classroom.

V. Conclusion

In summary, PR practice at BCBS is heavily influenced by research. Research allows practitioners to manage issues and address areas that need improvement in communication before they become crises. It also clues practitioners in on which tactics are appropriate for reaching their publics. Use of theory, particularly relationship management as advanced by Ledingham (2003) and various process models are ingrained in the practice, but not generally thought of at the conscious level. In light of this, I argue that practice and theory at BCBS are inseparable, but the BCBSLA practitioners discuss their operation in terms of practice rather than theoretical constructs.

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AUTHOR'S DETAILS

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