Providing a Lens for Business Students to Evaluate Effective Communication of CSR

Anne Bradstreet Grinols
Baylor University

Randy Waller
Baylor University

Association for Business Communication
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Overview

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Rhetorical Analysis Revisited

The Web Project: An Assessment of Effective
Communication of CSR
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- Student Engagement
- Deliverables
- Features
- Takeaway

CSR ➡ SBP

The emphasis of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the 21st century global marketplace drives the demand for Sustainable Business Practices (SBP) in business

Today's businesses must convey to stakeholders their commitment to CSR through SBP

We must teach today's students

➢ To understand CSR

➢ To recognize effective communication of CSR

➢ To recommend effective communication of SBP that demonstrates a company's dedication to CSR

CSR: Need to Know/Trust but Verify

- 85% of the public want major corporations to communicate regularly how their operations impact the environment

- 63% of the public trust these organizations to be truthful in their accounts

(Cone 2009)

CSR: Communicated Widely

- Reports on sustainability issues
  - Produced by over 3600 corporations worldwide
  - Made available by 40 of Fortune Top 50
- Stand-alone corporate sustainability websites
  - Sponsored by dozens of the world's largest multi-nationals
  - Designed to offer stakeholders access to in-depth information

("One Way Street" 2008; "Medtronic" 2008)

CSR: Communicated via Web

In the late 1990s, sustainability reporting migrated to cyberspace (Wheeler & Elkington 2001).

The Web offers:
- Global reach 24/7
- Direct, unfiltered communication with stakeholders
- Dynamic, versatile presentation of content

The Role of Rhetoric

Rhetoric is, for modern organizations, the instrument through which they "attempt to shape, change, and/or reinforce perception, affect (feelings), cognition (thinking), and/or behavior"

(Botan & Hazelton 2006)

Teaching Students to be Critics

Our students, as likely consumers and potential creators of organizational discourse, need to be skilled critics of such prime corporate texts as sustainability reports.

Specifically, our students need to be able to:

- Determine the **effectiveness** of an organization's rhetorical presentation;
- Propose **alternatives** for making that presentation more effective going forward.

Rhetorical Analysis Revisited

Skerlep (2001) maintains that many students lack the tools for rhetorical analysis because most textbooks he surveyed were grounded in traditional generic conventions, techniques, and formulas.

To fill this void, Skerlep (2001) advocates the use of Toulmin's analytical scheme to demonstrate rhetoric's central role in organizational communication today.

Components of Rhetoric (Toulmin)

Claim: A single statement presented for the adherence of others.

Grounds: A statement made about a situation that says rhetorical support is available to advance a claim.

Warrant: A statement that justifies using the grounds as a basis the claim.

Backing: Any support (appeals, arguments, examples, etc.) that provides specifics for the grounds or warrant.

(Rieke & Sillars 1997)

The Web Project: An Assessment of Effective Communication of CSR

Purpose of Project

- To develop a working understanding of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)
- To critique web-based communication and determine its effectiveness
- To enhance ability to develop and finalize an executive report
- To enhance ability to design, create, & deliver a PPT presentation
- To improve teamwork skills in a time-constrained situation
- To improve self and peer evaluation and feedback skills

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Faculty Preparation of Assignment

- Identify pairs of companies in various industries
- Develop evaluation criteria for students to use that relates to effectiveness of communication of company's commitment to CSR (rather than to CSR methods themselves)
- Have student teams draw for pairing

Student Engagement

- Develop a working definition of CSR
- Evaluate each company in their pairing according to criteria.
- Identify best practices and make recommendations for either or both websites

Student Deliverables

- Develop written report plus deliver an oral PPT presentation

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Format

WELCOME to Grinols&Waller Consulting PC (GWC). As you are probably aware, our firm has represented a wide array of our nation's largest trade associations before the United States Congress. Our clients contract with us to advise them on best current PR practices in the area of business sustainability reporting. Toward that end, GWC is presently engaged in an analysis of high-profile websites, and today your group will receive your project assignment.

In this project you will have the opportunity to analyze the communication effectiveness of two consumer-oriented websites concerning their commitment to sustainability and present your findings and recommendations in an executive written report and in an oral presentation.

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Format (cont.)

Your audience for the presentation consists of GWC's two senior partners, Drs. Grinols and Waller.

As part of your analysis, you will examine the effectiveness of each company's website according to the following criteria:

Appropriateness for intended audience

Clarity of message

Message strategy

Design/Appearance of Website

Accuracy

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Format (cont.)

With these in mind, you will examine the <u>communication effectiveness</u> of the site in conveying the company's commitment to sustainability. Then based on your findings, make recommendations to adopt one of the two websites as a model, while noting the strengths and weaknesses of both. Be aware that we are not interested in the technical aspects of website design, the history of the company, nor the products advertised. We are interested in <u>best current communication practices</u> for a corporate website.

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Representative Company Pairings

Pfizer and GlaxoSmithKline

Dow Chemical and Dupont

P&G and SC Johnson

ExxonMobil and Shell

Nike and Timberland

GM and Ford

GE and United Technologies

Subway and McDonalds

Target and Wal-Mart

Kraft and General Mills

Dell and HP

FedEx and UPS

Coca-Cola and PepsiCo

Rhetorical Map
of Sample Project Outcome

Grounds: P&G and Unilever compete on communicating adherence to SBP.

Claim: Unilever more effectively communicates commitment to SBP.

Warrant: Unilever makes better tactical use of rhetorical proofs.

Backing: Unilever's superior demonstration videos, expert testimony, quantitative arguments, commonplaces (timelines/goals etc.)

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Report Outline

I Introduction

    A. Short background

    B. Brief recommendations

II Body

    A. Short description of SBP on the two websites

    B. Comparative analysis of communication tactics

    C. Assessment of communication effectiveness

III Conclusion

    A. Detailed summary of recommendations

    B. Expected impact of recommendations

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Project Features

Format: consulting team reporting to firm for client

Internal deadlines: drafts, written report, PPT, presentation

Team dynamics: leadership, roles, and responsibilities

Rough drafts: submitted, reviewed, returned with comments

Feedback: REACT: Real-time Audience Critique Technology

Technology: REACT and website analysis

Self/peer review: follows complete project

Separate grades: drafts, report, presentation, self/peer review

Corporate comm.:   in-depth discussion of CPR and effective
                          audience-based communication

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F A Q

How do you come up with company pairings?

How long does this assignment take?

How do you grade the various components?

Why is there a grade for the self/peer review? Why is it separate?

Are you crazy?