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Beyond good writing: The multidisiplinary skills of the communications professional

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BEYOND GOOD WRITING:
THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY SKILLS
OF THE COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONAL

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Interdisciplinary Studies

by
Kimberly Annette Foreman
June 1991
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Abstract

Being an effective corporate communications professional requires a multidisciplinary set of skills that range far beyond the emphasis on good writing found in traditional English and Journalism degree programs. Professional and scholarly works describe a dynamic, evolving profession that requires an understanding of corporate culture, organizational dynamics, management goals and philosophy, marketing and public relations principles, the changing technologies of communication, and even visual design.

Corporate culture influences both the attitudes of the audience and the communications environment. Organizational dynamics are especially important to writers who must adapt to the realities of working with a variety of managers and peers. Management goals and philosophy determine what the communicator will be allowed to do. Reaching an increasingly discriminating audience requires a marketing and public relations approach. New communication technologies, such as desktop publishing, require new skills. A visually-oriented audience demands attractive, eye-catching page layouts.

The paradigm of an employee rideshare campaign illustrates how all these skills came into play, and demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of the communicator's role.
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Introduction

"Many of us, leaving the university with our journalism or communications degrees, never imagined the range of duties we would be handling on the job. And the profession continues to change, bringing new technologies...new media that force us to broaden our skills, and new demands by our organizations to find better ways to reach our audiences."\(^1\)

Being an effective corporate communications professional requires a multidisciplinary set of skills that range far beyond the emphasis on good writing found in traditional English and Journalism degree programs. The literature in the field, including professional society publications and guides for communicators, collectively describes a dynamic, evolving profession that requires an understanding of corporate culture, organizational dynamics, management goals and philosophy, marketing and public relations principles, the changing technologies of communication, and even the principles of visual design. The professional literature is supported by scholarly works that deal with the larger topics of corporate culture, organizational communication, and interpersonal communication.

In *Culture and Related Corporate Realities*, Sathe states, "It is now widely acknowledged that corporate culture has a subtle but pervasive influence on companies and their managers. Corporate culture has an important bearing on organizational performance and affects managerial ability to make needed organizational improvements."\(^2\) Understanding
and assessing the corporate culture is one of the most important requirements for being an effective communicator in a corporate setting. The culture not only influences the attitudes and expectations of the audience, but also affects the overall communications environment in which the communicator must operate.

Understanding organizational dynamics, including interpersonal and group interaction, is important for anyone working in a corporate environment. However, it is especially critical for writers, who because of the generally solitary nature of that activity may be used to working independently. They may believe that their work is theirs alone and will flow directly from their fingers to the hands of the reader. To the contrary, in most organizations the communicator must work with a wide variety of managers and peers--often not communicators themselves--who may have the power to significantly influence or even overrule his or her work. Often, too, the communicator must work as part of a team, in which case an understanding of small group dynamics helps the communicator function effectively.

In addition to adapting to the realities of the corporate environment, the communicator must learn to work within the constraints of management goals and philosophy. As stated in Inside Organizational Communication, "The primary task in developing a (communication) policy is to define the management's unique culture and top management's communi-
cation philosophy...the most important requisite is support and involvement from the top."

While understanding the corporate culture, management goals and philosophy, and organizational dynamics forms the basis for effective performance in a corporate environment, the techniques of communicating with the audience are based on marketing and public relations principles, especially those related to strategic planning, audience analysis, rhetorical approach, and competing for attention. "The secret to any successful employee communication program is to make use of essentially all media in a coordinated effort, one which articulates key messages, states them in a variety of ways to capture everyone's attention, and repeats them over time to reinforce their importance."^4

The need to find creative ways to capture the audience's attention is becoming increasingly critical with the changes in audience needs and interests. For example, while leisure time has been decreasing, employees are receiving a growing volume of written materials (ads, mass mailings, marketing materials, etc.). They have less time for, and less interest in, reading every piece. Computers, telemail, fax machines, videos, and other forms of electronic information have also multiplied, adding more competition for the employees' attention.

Perhaps the biggest change faced by communicators is the rapid growth in communication technology, as this statement
from *Inside Organizational Communication* points out: "Part of the reason for the changing role of the business communicator—from 'house organ editor' to communication specialist in areas from writing to videotape production—has been the expansion and sophistication of the media the professional uses." These new tools and new media bring with them both opportunity and challenge, particularly the need to develop the skills to use them effectively. For example, the proliferation of "desktop publishing" (producing publications with small computers such as the Macintosh or IBM, using page design software programs), has given the communicator the tools to produce professional-looking, eye-catching page layouts. However, it has also raised employee expectations for strong visual presentation, and given stiff competition to the plain memo or bulletin.

Phil Dougis, an internationally known photographic consultant and director of Dougis Visual Workshops, believes that the visual design of a publication is far more important than the editorial content in reaching an increasingly visually sophisticated audience. "It will remain for the visually literate among us to shape the 21st century publications as they should be shaped—publications based on visual content for visually oriented readers."

With desktop publishing, the writer and editor often becomes the layout and graphics designer as well, which requires the communicator to be as skillful in design as in writing.
This thesis will illustrate how the various principles just described were applied in an actual situation by using the paradigm of an employee communications campaign designed to promote ridesharing at a Southern California aerospace company. Knowledge of the rideshare program is based on personal involvement, as well as interviews with the key people responsible for the program. Knowledge of the company's corporate culture is based on 11 years of personal involvement with the company, at various levels and in a variety of roles.

In addition to being a partial fulfillment of the requirement for a masters degree in a special major, this thesis is also intended to be of practical use to both prospective and current business communicators, as well as to people in other fields who may be faced with the task of implementing a rideshare program or similar type of campaign.
"Understanding as much about an organization's culture as possible will greatly help our understanding of how and why an organization communicates as it does."7

"Culture influences not only what people do, but also how they communicate, feel, think, and justify their actions."8

Corporate culture, which Sathe defines as "the set of important assumptions (often unstated) that members of a community share in common,"9 was the key force that shaped the employee communications campaign discussed in this thesis. This chapter briefly outlines the communications challenge presented by the imposition of a rideshare program at "ABC," a division of a large Los Angeles-based aerospace and defense engineering company, then describes ABC's corporate culture and communications environment. As shown in later chapters, ABC's culture influenced everything from the delegation of responsibility for planning and implementing the program to the rhetoric of the written and oral communications.

ABC had faced many challenges: designing and coordinating the development of complex new weapon systems, working under government contracts that could change overnight at the whim of politicians, and riding herd on a variety of associate contractors.
However, in 1988 they were given a completely different kind of task, one that could not be tackled with all their available engineering skills and experience. The task, mandated by the South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD), was to convince ABC employees to give up driving alone to work and start ridesharing.

Regulation XV, adopted by the SCAQMD in December 1987, requires that all companies within its jurisdiction (the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and the non-desert portions of San Bernardino) of 100 employees or more reduce the number of cars arriving at the workplace, and specifies the amount of reduction. The method used to achieve this reduction is left up to each individual company.

For ABC, the required goal was to achieve an "average vehicle ridership" (AVR) of 1.5, meaning an average of 1.5 people per vehicle. With 1,274 employees, 83 percent of whom drove alone, that would require reducing the number of vehicles by 360, with those drivers joining carpools, riding the bus, bicycling, walking, or switching to "alternate fuel" (such as methane) vehicles.

The task of convincing about 25 percent of the employees to permanently, voluntarily change their personal lifestyles by giving up the freedom of driving their own cars is an extremely difficult task for any employer in car-crazy Southern California. An article in the Los Angeles Times, one of many similar reports in the media, describes the diffi-
culty of getting drivers to carpool or use mass transit. Drivers complain that mass transit is either poor or non-existent, and say they are not willing to give up the privacy and independence of their own cars.

ABC could have chosen to find a way to penalize solo drivers, but, like almost all companies facing Regulation XV (according to Commuter Transportation Services, a rideshare consulting company), it chose to try incentives instead of risking an angry backlash from employees.

Thus the challenge became one of communication: to reach the employees with information and persuasion to effect a change in their behavior. This particular kind of goal—changing behavior—is the most difficult challenge of all, whether faced by managers, advertisers, public relations and marketing professionals, or any other type of communicator.

In addition to the ordinary problems of trying to convince drivers to give up a cherished way of life, ABC also faced problems unique to its own situation: its corporate culture and resulting communications environment, its geographic location, and its management philosophy, which both reflects and reinforces the corporate culture.

At ABC, the general manager is an engineer, rather than someone trained specifically in corporate management. His orientation is reflected in top management philosophy (which is not stated in writing but is clearly inferred from his
actions): the engineering function is primary; demand good job performance, but otherwise leave the engineers alone, and let the individual departments run themselves.

ABC, which works under basically secure government contracts and has not been forced to develop a competitive posture, has never articulated a formal corporate goal or "identity" that would demand teamwork and more lateral interconnection. The corporate culture is adapted to this type of operation, as well as to ABC's employee demographics.

According to figures provided by management, 69.9 percent of the workers are classed as "professional," 9.3 percent as "technical," 19.2 percent as "administrative/clerical," and the remainder as "temporary" or "shop/service." ABC's workforce, therefore, is composed mainly of highly skilled professionals, who are used to a large degree of independence and who, unlike young, unskilled workers, for example, are not easily dictated to or patronized. The general attitude is "we know how to do our jobs--don't hamper us with bureaucracy, get off our backs, stay out of our personal lives."

With the exception of an annual bond drive and charitable donation campaign (each at the request of the corporate headquarters in Los Angeles), no attempt is made to influence or interfere in the non-job-related activities of the employees. Company picnics are left to the discretion of a volunteer employee social committee, and are usually not attended
or specifically endorsed by top management. ABC has never attempted to make its employees feel like a "family." Consequently, there was no real basis for appealing to employees' company spirit or loyalty, or for appealing for dedication to a common goal outside of good job performance.

In addition, the physical environment around the workplace makes most alternative forms of transportation impractical. Bus service in the area is poor, and the major streets around the workplace are not suitable for pedestrians or bicyclists. Vanpools, a popular alternative at some companies, are not feasible for most employees. At ABC, 67 percent live within a 15-mile radius and vanpools must serve longer-distance commutes to be cost-effective.

The short commute, through streets that generally are free from the congestion found in Orange and Los Angeles Counties, also means that the drive to work for most employees is relatively easy and inexpensive. Saving gas and reducing the stress of driving by joining a carpool is consequently not a very strong incentive in itself.

After receiving notification of Regulation XV, and making the decision to offer incentives, the usual procedure for many medium and large-size companies would be to hand over the task to the public relations or marketing department, which would have the expertise to develop a campaign to promote the incentives program, or to the human relations office, which would at least have experience in communicating
employee benefits or in overseeing an employee newsletter.

At ABC, however, no department or staff is assigned to employee communications. There is no formal recognition of such a function, or of the need for one.

Human Resources is responsible for hirings and terminations, and for some types of personal employee problems. Benefits information is handled by the corporate headquarters in Los Angeles.

The Publications department, which includes a word processing group, an in-house print shop, and an art department, acts only as a service group whose main function is to produce technical documents for the engineers. While the art group does produce flyers for functions such as retirement parties, the jobs come from a variety of employee customers, and there is no central control over what is produced.

The word processing group includes a technical writer/editor, called "Katie" in this thesis, whose background is in corporate communications. Although she writes and edits two newsletters for outside organizations (her work for them is sponsored by ABC), her work for ABC itself consists primarily of technical reports and formal company policy statements that are not aimed at employees. The technical writer/editor position is low level professional; it has no supervisory authority and is categorized as "engineering support."

A monthly employee newsletter, normally a vehicle for
conveying company policies or goals under the supervision of top management, is instead a collection of human interest features put out by an employee volunteer who started the publication out of her own interest in journalism. Except for cursory review of the articles after they are written, made by the Human Resources manager (who rarely has comments), there is little management involvement in the content other than an infrequent request for a specific type of article. Even these requests come not from top management but from individual managers who want to highlight some program or achievement they feel is important.

ABC's top management rarely communicates with employees at large. Employees receive a wide variety of memos with information on specific topics such as bulletins announcing changes in management assignments, notices of change in certain administrative procedures, etc. There is also quite a bit of mail from corporate headquarters, most of which does not apply to the ABC division employees. At ABC, most written notices are considered "junk mail" and are discarded after only a quick glance. In the absence of written information on important events at ABC, the "grapevine" is the primary source of information and speculation.

A good example of the lack of formal communication at ABC was the management response to the impending closure of the military base which houses its offices. Employees first heard of this when they read in the outside media about the
decision to close military bases. Following the initial media coverage, rumors began flying about what would happen to ABC if the base closed and its military customer moved away or was disbanded.

Despite the high level of anxiety and speculation, ABC management remained silent. The only sources of real information were newspapers and television news. For an entire year of continuous new developments in the base closure plan, ABC employees heard nothing from their company. The military customer eventually sent out a memo discussing the various possibilities to ABC offices as well as to its own employees.

Even without written statements, employees could have been reached through department or work group meetings led by their own managers. While some managers held meetings to talk with their employees, using whatever information they had, these meetings were at the instigation of the individual managers and were not part of an ABC plan.

In summary, ABC had no formal channels for either written or oral vertical or horizontal communications. "Top down" communications were limited to the general manager's staff meetings with his immediate subordinates, who then passed on the information in their own staff meetings at their own discretion. Upward communication followed a formal requirement that employees report first to their immediate supervisor with any problem or comment. The rigid hierarchical structure of the company discouraged freer access.
to the upper level managers. Lateral communication between
departments was limited to the interaction of the upper level
managers at the general manager's staff meetings. Overall, by
culture and by formal policy, ABC had a negative
communication environment, which later chapters will show had
a significant impact on the rideshare campaign.
Chapter 2
Planning the Campaign Strategy

"Communication must be a planned process--there must be a strategy--involving both communication professionals and key management people." 13

"Because communication is a two-way street--there is no communication if the message is not received--an in-depth knowledge of whom you're communicating with is a key factor...." 14

"To meet changing communication needs, today's professional communicator has had to become more sophisticated and knowledgeable not only about journalism and communication but about the social sciences, business and economics, and organizational dynamics as well." 15

This chapter describes the strategic planning, including the critical factor of audience analysis, and the small group dynamics involved in ABC's development of a rideshare program. The successful functioning of a volunteer committee chosen to design the program was crucial to the development of an effective employee-based approach, one that would break away from the administrative, dictatorial approach of most ABC programs. The committee used formal and informal research techniques to help give them an "in-depth knowledge" of the employee audience, in addition to their own perspective as ABC employees.

The general manager's initial response to the rideshare assignment was a radical departure from the status quo. After deciding on the incentives approach, he asked for a committee of "interested volunteers" to come up with those incentives.

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His appeal was in the form of an open letter to employees, two single-spaced pages long, which described in detail the mandate given by Regulation XV, ABC's goal, and his proposals for meeting that goal.

Whether or not the general manager himself wrote the letter, it represented a major difference from the previous, infrequent messages from the top. It was informal and conversational rather than bureaucratic, written in first person and directly addressed the employees as "you" rather than the usual "the employee." It was also unusual in that it frankly stated the uncertainty he himself felt, and talked about different possibilities instead of assuming a decisive, dictatorial tone. Near the end it contained the appeal to "please help."

About a dozen volunteers applied to be on the committee, and eight were selected by the Human Relations manager. Their selection was based on an attempt to get a cross-section of employees, but was otherwise random in that no consideration was given to their individual personalities or skills. One employee was asked to be on the committee, although he hadn't volunteered, because of his experience with government agencies. With this experience, he could presumably help ABC to understand various regulations and requirements.

The committee did include a fairly good cross-section of ABC employees: three women and five men, ranging in ages from the twenties to the sixties, and including a secretary, three
non-engineering professionals, and four engineers, two of them middle-level managers.

It was at this point that Katie became involved in the rideshare program planning and implementation, as a member of the committee. In an ironic reflection of the negative communications environment at ABC, she was not selected because she was a professional communicator; she was simply another employee. Because of her recognition that the rideshare program would depend upon an effective communication campaign, however, she voluntarily took on the duties that would normally be assigned to a communicator. Throughout the program, her volunteer status and the lack of a formal communications role limited her ability to function effectively. She was restricted to doing whatever she could convince the committee and the program administrators to accept, which required her to depend entirely on interpersonal skills—an extreme example of the situation faced by many communicators with little official power or prestige.

The general manager spoke to the committee at its first meeting, but did not meet with it after that until it was ready to present a proposal to him. At that first meeting, he told them that they had free reign in designing an incentives proposal, with certain specific restrictions (such as no cash awards, no four-day workweek option, etc.). To implement the rideshare program, he appointed three administrative (rather
than engineering) managers, who would be trained, in a SCAQMD-approved course, as Employee Transportation Coordinators (ETCs). The ETCs, who were also at that first meeting, were told by the general manager that they were not to "run" the committee. They were to serve as advisors only.

The highest-ranking ETC, the one with overall responsibility for the program, was ABC's top administrator. (He will be called "Dave" in this thesis.) The other two ETCs were a middle level manager ("Joanne") who served under him, and her administrative assistant. The top administrator passed on the day-to-day responsibility for the program to these two, who also were appointed to attend the committee meetings.

Upward communication—in this case letting employees themselves tell management what they want—is widely recognized as an important element in employee communications. It is valuable in effective planning, generation of ideas, and improving morale and acceptance of management decisions. In this case it also had the advantage of creating a group of rideshare "ambassadors" who would have a personal stake in the success of the program, and who would personally promote it among their coworkers and friends.

Using the upward communication provided by an employee committee gave the program a good beginning, and gave it an initial advantage over the companies that used management dictate. However, leaving the implementation to the three ETCs, with no official role for communications, hampered the
success of the program in ways that will be described later.

Asking a group of eight people of diverse personalities and backgrounds to agree on the solution to a problem as difficult as changing employee behavior could easily have resulted in chaos without effective leadership, a casualty of group dynamics.

The topic of small group dynamics has been addressed at length in communications, management, psychology, and other fields. It's useful to deal with it briefly here because most business communicators will have to work within some types of small groups—whether a problem-solving group like this one, a policy committee, or work groups made up of peers or subordinates. Goldhaber\textsuperscript{17} provides a good summary of small group dynamics, including the terms and concepts used here.

The rideshare committee members met on equal footing; that is, those who were managers were not assumed to have any more authority or importance than the secretary or the non-management professionals. All members adopted this attitude from the beginning, which helped prevent the higher status employees from controlling or intimidating the others and gave everyone a chance to contribute ideas.

If the group had been left to itself, it may have quickly become unproductive because of this very lack of a leader. However, the general manager appointed the personnel manager to chair the committee, and his leadership proved
very effective in facilitating group interaction and keeping it moving toward the goal. It also allowed Katie to argue for the necessity for a communications approach and to persuade the group to accept her expertise in that area.

The committee chair kept the self-serving behaviors of some of the more aggressive members (trying to dominate the discussion, rejecting others' ideas, etc.) under control, and managed hostilities and conflicts that arose by harmonizing, compromising, etc. (For example, "I hear what you're saying, Bill, and that's a valid concern, but I think we need to get back to the issue that Mary brought up....")

Through his leadership, the natural conflicts that arose from the differences in temperaments and ideas were managed so that they were productive. One member, who reacted unusually emotionally and angrily to frustration, started to walk out and declared he was quitting the committee. The chairman persuaded him to sit back down and stay with the group (much to the privately expressed dismay of those who were glad to see him go), and he gradually became less combative as the group developed a camaraderie over time. Eventually, his input proved to be valuable because of his unique insights and his tenacity.

One conflict did become a source of continued problems, however, and that was the ETCs' insistence that the committee deal only with incentives and not concern itself with implementation. Katie argued, and the committee agreed, that
incentives alone were meaningless unless they were effectively publicized, given company-wide management support, and accompanied by more information.

Katie's approach, which she convinced the other committee members to support, was to design a multi-element campaign. The committee members agreed that the task of changing employee behavior required a public relations/marketing approach: conducting research and doing a thorough audience analysis, developing specifically targeted messages, carefully choosing the media, and planning a strategic timetable for each element of the campaign. Accordingly, they planned as much of the campaign as they could with their limited resources, and hoped that management would follow through. (As discussed in the next chapters, the ETCs only occasionally followed the committee's recommended PR/marketing approach. They frequently rejected it in favor of the administrative approach their professional training and experience required in the performance of their regular jobs at ABC.)

Through consensus, the committee agreed that ABC employees were not likely to respond to "patriotic" appeals (good for the company, help clean the air, etc.), to a heavy-handed management dictate, or to any other approach contrary to corporate culture. Also, because ABC employees generally are well-paid professionals, most wouldn't care about saving gas through carpooling.
However, even though the members felt they knew the ABC employee audience fairly well, all agreed that an extensive survey should be made to determine how many were currently ridesharing, where they lived, etc., before a campaign could be planned. They agreed that since unsolicited surveys usually have a low response, the survey forms should be accompanied by a cover letter briefly explaining the purpose and signed by the general manager. In addition, they should be collected by the department managers to ensure that everyone turned one in. (Using such a heavy-handed method for data gathering would not interfere in the campaign itself.)

However, Joanne, under pressure from Dave to "get something out right away" and afraid that the committee's idea would take too long, instead sent out an unaccompanied survey form, with no explanation introducing the set of questions. Since there was no management involvement in collection, only about 40 percent of the employees turned theirs in—a typical response to an unsolicited piece of mail.

The surveys, a formal research device, thus did not provide an accurate statistical data base. They did include some comments from the respondents, though, which reinforced the committee's ideas about employee attitudes, based on the result of informal research—talking to coworkers and using personal observations.

Using this formally and informally collected information, and drawing on PR/marketing campaign planning princi-
ples, the committee put together a campaign proposal based on four main elements: management support, prizes, publicity, and company recognition and facilitation.

Management support included management participation in ridesharing, attendance at ridesharing events such as a ridesharers' picnic, support for reasonable requests for flextime to accommodate carpooling, and declaring formal dedication to the rideshare program. Getting top management support is widely acknowledged to be crucial to the success of any corporate campaign.

The prizes were the basis of the incentives program and included weekly raffles for a variety of smaller prizes (movie tickets, penlights, desk clocks, savings bonds, etc.), with each participant turning in a raffle ticket for each day of ridesharing that week. Quarterly and semiannual drawings would be held for large prizes such as gift certificates for $500 in travel, and $700 and $1,000 from Circuit City.

Publicity, another crucial element, would consist of a variety of media to increase the ways of reaching the target employee audience. A monthly newsletter would be created and devoted exclusively to ridesharing. To make it more attractive for employees with limited time and patience, it was to be kept to just one page (two-sided), with one or two photos and an informal style.

Posters would be displayed in the lobbies, rotated on a monthly basis. A slogan—"Doing my Share"—was created and
would be put on bumper stickers and windshield sun shades (which would give free publicity every time they were used), and on T-shirts, coffee mugs, and as many of the weekly prizes as possible (even the lucite clocks could be imprinted with it). To provide an even greater variety of media, Katie proposed that a ten-minute video about the rideshare program be produced and shown over the local cable access channel as well as in various locations at ABC so that employees could watch it on company time. The video would be light in tone, and would feature a number of ABC employee ridesharers. The video idea was approved on the condition that it be produced cheaply.

Another critical element planned was a series of small group meetings that would collectively include all employees. Based on the approach used in the past to promote the charitable donation and bond drives, the meetings would include a brief pitch by a representative of the rideshare program, followed by questions and answers. This type of face-to-face communication is widely accepted as the most fundamental and most important medium for getting information to employees, and is ranked in preference by employees as second only to personal messages from their immediate supervisors.18

The company recognition and facilitation was to include a "thank you" picnic, on company time, for all ridesharers, with the general manager present; lunchtime receptions for
prospective ridesharers to meet carpool partners; and accom-
modations for walkers and bicyclists such as showers and bike
racks.

After the proposal was completed, the next task was to
gain the general manager's approval and then begin the cam-
paign by introducing the rideshare program to employees, two
crucial steps that are described in the next two chapters.
"Communication goals and objectives must be meshed with management's goals and objectives, and they must have management's stamp of approval if they are to be effective."\(^1\)

To gain the general manager's approval for the proposal, the committee knew it would have to carefully prepare a presentation geared toward his goals and philosophy, not their own ideas. The committee knew that, while the general manager was concerned about meeting Regulation XV and was willing to dedicate company resources to that end, his personal views (which he had expressed openly) were that the whole rideshare idea was a waste of time and money, and an intrusion into the private affairs of the company. Thus, the rhetorical approach should convey the message that "we all know this whole thing is ridiculous, but since we're stuck with it, here's what we believe is the best way to make it work with minimal expense."

The committee agreed that he would expect a "briefing," complete with "vugraphs" (overhead transparencies). The presentation should be the same as for an engineering proposal: first, describe the challenge, or problem, then the goal, the overall plan for reaching that goal, the individual elements of the plan along with the rationale for each, and finally a summary and a declaration of the committee's
confidence in its potential for success.

Katie was chosen to make the presentation, based on her experience in public speaking (through Toastmasters) and her enthusiasm for the program. She planned to strike a tone that included a lot of humor while stressing the committee's belief in the campaign as they had designed it. That way, she reasoned, they would make the presentation enjoyable for him and keep his interest while still gaining his respect for the proposal.

The general manager entered into the lighthearted spirit of the briefing, joking with the committee at various points yet still paying close attention to the presentation. At the end, he indicated that he was pleased with what the committee had done and gave his approval to start the program. He also promised to personally ask for the support of his top managers.

With this blessing from the general manager, ABC was already ahead of some companies whose rideshare programs were ignored or sometimes even actively opposed by top management. However, while the initial support gave the program a boost, the general manager failed to follow it up in succeeding months as the campaign progressed, as will be described in Chapter 5.
Chapter 4

Introducing the Rideshare Program:
Using a Public Relations/Marketing Approach

"There is no such thing as a captive audience. People are active.... They are too busy to be told, and cannot be told. They must be won over.... The fact is, too many other interesting activities and subjects compete with ours."20

"The ideal first step in putting together a communication program is developing an overall policy to set the tone for the program."21

"A major shortcoming in some organizational communications is the result of managements that insist on addressing...employees...in terms of what management thinks employee attitudes and interests should be, rather than what they actually are."22

"Our audiences have become more visually sophisticated over the past two decades. They no longer really read--particularly free publications. They skim them. They look at the pictures first, read the heads and perhaps the captions, and move on to other things."23

Introducing the rideshare program to the employees presented the same challenges as any other type of employee communication campaign: getting the employees' attention and winning them over, setting the right tone from the beginning, addressing employee attitudes and interests, and finding a way to appeal to a visually sophisticated audience that would not be willing to sit and read through a standard memo or report. Throughout, the campaign would have to take the rhetorical approach, based on the definition of rhetoric as planned communication which emphasizes the interests of the
audience as well as the speaker (communicator), in addition to the more generally used definition of rhetoric as effective speech (communication).

This chapter describes how a marketing/public relations style campaign was used to gain the attention of the employees and overcome their negative feelings toward ridesharing. It will also describe how the management philosophy of the ETCs influenced the communication campaign, and how it affected the role of the communicator.

The successful briefing to the general manager essentially ended the committee's involvement in the rideshare program, leaving the work to Dave, Joanne, and her assistant. Since Dave appointed Joanne to handle the day-to-day details, she assumed the primary responsibility. Although her skills as an administrator were excellent, and had made her an efficient and well-liked manager, her background and attitudes ran counter to the approach required by the rideshare campaign, specifically in the critical areas of planning and rhetorical approach.

In marketing, public relations, and any other communications-related field, outlining an overall strategy at the beginning of a campaign—taking a proactive approach—is recognized as crucial to the success of that campaign. However, Joanne was used to a reactive approach—quickly sending out a flyer or memo in response to an event, usually under the pressure of a tight deadline.
In addition, Joanne's previous communications were based on the assumption of a captive audience—one that would have to read the messages she sent out. Since those messages included important information such as changes in travel request forms, cashier's bulletins, etc., this assumption was appropriate. With the rideshare program, the opposite was true: the audience had to be persuaded to look at the information and choose to respond.

The problem presented by Joanne's approach was especially acute in this case. Joanne's attitude, expressed to coworkers, included such statements as, "I'm not going to spoonfeed them (the employees)," "I don't care what they want--this is what we're going to do," and "They have to learn that they can't expect us to give them something every time they turn around--they have to learn to take responsibility for doing the right thing without a reward."

Unfortunately, this attitude was echoed by Dave, who stated (after hearing that many employees had expressed a desire for a lunchtime shuttle to downtown for those who didn't have their car at work), "No, no, no, we're not going to start letting them tell us what to do. Then they'll say that they want this, or they want that, and I'm not going to get into that kind of thing."

Since what the company is asking from the employees is to voluntarily do something they don't want to do, ignoring their needs and desires results only in their refusal to
cooperate—not in their "learning" some kind of lesson or feeling chastened.

Despite Joanne's personal attitudes, however, she was willing to allow Katie, with her communications background, to be the editor of the rideshare newsletter and produce some other pieces of publicity, such as a rideshare brochure. However, Katie's role was still that of a volunteer, and communications was still not officially acknowledged to be a part of the rideshare campaign.

Katie persuaded Joanne to delay putting out any kind of announcement of the rideshare program until just the right vehicle for doing so could be designed. The survey comments, and the committee's informal research, had indicated a strong negative feeling toward the whole concept of ridesharing as well as a general resentment toward the company for trying to meddle in their personal activities. The initial communications with the employee audience would have to ease this negative attitude and create instead a feeling of goodwill toward the program.

To accomplish this, it was important to avoid the tone of a management dictate and instead emphasize that the program was designed by fellow employees. The rhetorical approach would be: "Hey, guys, we came up with some neat ideas that we think will make ridesharing kind of fun, and even profitable. We don't normally rideshare either, but we're willing to give it a try—at least for the prizes."
After addressing and countering the negative feelings, the campaign should ideally follow known marketing techniques for persuasion: 1) attract attention, 2) arouse interest, 3) inform and explain, 4) satisfy concerns and answer objections, and 5) ask for a commitment to action. 27

Katie's plan for beginning the campaign was to first send out a newsletter, with an attractive layout and informal, first person articles based on the "Hey guys" theme stated above. Within a week, the general manager would talk directly to the employees about the new program, at an "all-hands" meeting open to everyone. The final introductory piece would be a simple, short brochure describing the various elements of the program and telling how to participate.

The "all-hands" meeting, which the general manager had agreed to as part of the committee's proposal (much to their surprise), was felt to be crucial; such face-to-face contact between employees and the general manager was rare enough that it would attract attention. (Previous all-hands meetings, held less than once a year, usually were addressed by representatives from the Los Angeles headquarters and seldom focused on issues relevant to the ABC division.) In addition, personally delivered information from top management is one of the most effective kinds of business communication and is highly regarded by employees. 28

The first newsletter, written by Katie, was four pages long for that issue only since it contained a lot of informa-
As planned, the lead article set a conversational, first-person tone that was felt to be more likely to stand out from other written materials the employees were used to seeing. It also emphasized the role of the employee volunteers by speaking from their viewpoint. It began: "We're the 'interested volunteers' who responded to (the general manager's) call for help in figuring out a way to get more ABC employees to rideshare...."

The article went on to say, "The volunteers in our group are typical of ABC employees--most of us drive alone--so we started by asking ourselves, 'What would make me, or the people I work with, want to rideshare?'"

Although the art department was given the job of laying out the newsletter using a Macintosh PageMaker program, the artist had very little background in publication design. Since the visual element was crucial, Katie planned the rough layout and worked closely with the artist to see that the final product was what she had envisioned. Since the artist was used to working independently, some interpersonal conflicts arose when he and Katie had differences of opinion. When these differences arose, they could only be resolved by discussion and compromise, because at ABC there was no formally established working relationship between editor and artist. There was no recognition of the interconnection of the two roles.

In this first issue, the artist was willing to follow
most of Katie's design ideas. A photo (of the committee) was run 1\frac{1}{2} column wide on a two-column page, with the caption centered to the right of the photo in the 1\frac{1}{2} column of white space. This off-center look adds interest to the page, and the extra white space it creates makes it more inviting by avoiding a dense block of text.

Using a recommended "selling" technique, Katie included an audience participation element: a "name this newsletter" and poster idea contest. Prizes of $100 savings bonds and dinner for two were offered to the employees who submitted the six best poster ideas and the best newsletter title. This contest invited employee participation in the program in its early stages, and the prizes provided a further positive element.

Anticipating the employees' skepticism about the whole idea of involving the company in something like ridesharing, an article at the top of the second page, titled "What is ABC Doing in the Ridesharing Business?" briefly explained Regulation XV and the fact that this was a mandate imposed from the outside rather than an ABC idea.

Finally, addressing a common (and actually fairly accurate) perception among employees that top and middle level managers would not participate—that ridesharing was only for the "grunts"—an article and photo titled "Ridesharers of the Month" focused on three managers in one department who were carpoolers.
Response to the newsletter, based on informal research by the committee members and the ETCs, was fairly positive. While it didn't induce employees to sign up for the program in droves, it did seem to dispel some of the negative attitudes toward ridesharing and make them more receptive to further information.

The next step in the introduction of the rideshare program, the all-hands meeting, was even more successful than the newsletter (as expected), and generated additional positive responses. Though the committee's plan was for the general manager to talk about the rideshare program, he was well known for his aversion to public speaking, or attracting attention of any kind. Instead, he appointed Katie to address the employees since he had been pleased with her presentation at the briefing.

Without the prestige of a personal address by the general manager, the all-hands presentation would have to focus on a different approach. Katie decided to continue the same kind of rhetoric used in the newsletter, with the goal of fostering a camaraderie with the employees, gaining their trust and goodwill, and piquing their interest. The presentation, which included much more humor and an even more informal approach than the briefing, elicited an enthusiastic response—partially because of the talk itself and partially because of the novelty of having a low-level employee speak at a formal gathering (particularly unusual for companies...
such as ABC which have a rigid hierarchical structure).

Following the all-hands meeting, the rideshare program was a topic of conversation among employees. While only about half the total number of employees had attended the meeting (the auditorium holds fewer than 600 people), those who had not gone soon heard about it.

The final element of the program's introduction was a brochure containing all the information the employees would need to participate in ridesharing and be eligible for prizes. Katie wrote the text, which included the headings "Why is ABC in the Rideshare Business?" (repeating the theme of the newsletter article), "What Exactly is the ABC Rideshare Program?" (a three-sentence summary), and "Prizes! Prizes! Prizes!," which included an explanation of the weekly, quarterly, and semiannual drawings and a list of the prizes. In a narrow column, a series of brief paragraphs described the various modes of transportation and explained how ABC would assist the employee in using them.

Joanne and Katie agreed to use a heavy yellow card stock to give the brochure a durable, permanent feel. The yellow was chosen because of its friendly, informal look. The paper, which was cut to 10 inches by 12-3/4 inches, was folded into three vertical sections.

Continuing the friendly, informal theme, Katie used a simple drawing of a kangaroo with a baby in its pouch ("ridesharing") on the cover. On the inside, a drawing of a
giraffe with a bird riding on its head repeated the theme. The giraffe was placed under the text, with a block of white space framing the head and upper neck, and also the lower body and legs. Text covered the middle portion of the drawing, breaking up the text and the rigidity of the layout.

On the back of the brochure was a silhouette of two people in the front seat of a car, with a stylized bus or van on the left. Joanne chose this drawing as the official logo of the rideshare program, and it was later imprinted along with the "Doing My Share" slogan on promotional items.

While the brochure did not elicit the response of the newsletter or the all-hands presentation, many employees did keep their copies instead of throwing them away, indicating that they had at least been given some attention and were not regarded as "junk mail" by most employees.

A registration drive was conducted shortly after the brochure came out, in the form of a "rideshare faire" held at lunchtime in an open area of the ABC complex. The faire consisted of a set of booths with representatives from local bus companies, a bicycle shop, Caltrans, the California Highway Patrol, etc. A free lunch at the cafeteria was offered to all those who registered in the program, along with a bumper sticker and windshield sun shade (both with the logo and slogan). Nearly 200 employees registered for the program that day, bringing to 315 the total number of people who had formally indicated their willingness to at least
consider ridesharing.

With the completion of the first registration drive, the introduction of the rideshare program was complete. So far, the campaign had been successful in its initial objectives: to set the right tone, overcome negative employee attitudes, arouse interest, and give information. The stage was set for the final goal of actually getting about a third of the employees to join carpools or find alternative methods of transportation.

Achieving this goal would require intensive follow-ups to the introduction, effective incentives, and the publicity to make them work. Chapter 5 describes what ABC did after the "honeymoon" was over and the hard part began.
Chapter 5
Running Out of Gas: A Losing Battle
With Management Philosophy

"A cautionary note about upward communication: listening implies action.... The goodwill derived from such exchanges will quickly turn to disappointment and later to resentment and bitterness if nothing is done to follow up on comments, suggestions, or complaints."29

In this case, ABC's failure to follow through on the plans made by the rideshare committee did more than cause disappointment and resentment; it negated much of the success of the early campaign. When the role of the committee ended, so did most of the employee-based marketing approach they had planned. The administrative, non-communication philosophy of ABC management took over, except where Katie could persuade the ETCs to include her in the program's implementation.

After the rideshare faire was over, at the point when the campaign should have built on the momentum created with its introduction, the ETCs instead turned their attention back to their regular jobs and essentially dropped most of the promotion efforts. The weekly raffles were held regularly and the prizes awarded to between 8 and 11 winners each week, but there was no attendant publicity except for after-the-fact articles in the newsletter. Ideally, the prizes should have become the center of the campaign, since they were the main incentives to rideshare. There were numerous promotional
opportunities, such as inviting top managers to draw the names, or displaying some of the prizes in the lobbies. However, Joanne repeatedly rejected suggestions for a publicity campaign, saying it would take too much time and wasn't necessary.

One of the best opportunities for publicity was lost when the time came for the quarterly drawing, which would award a $500 and a $700 gift certificate. Such a major prize, in contrast to the smaller items given away weekly, could attract the employees' attention and encourage them to rideshare to participate in the raffle.

However, here again management philosophy resulted in a loss to the campaign. The general manager, when approached with the idea of holding the drawing in public, with an eye-catching flyer announcing it ahead of time, said that he didn't think that kind of activity was appropriate for ABC. He also did not want to attract attention to himself; his management style was low-key and unobtrusive, as demonstrated by his unwillingness to address the all-hands meeting.

At this crucial point, the general manager withdrew much of the personal support he had promised the committee in the beginning. He also was unwilling to appoint additional, much needed staff to help implement the rideshare program. Joanne and her assistant were both occupied with their regular, full-time duties, and barely managed to cope with the basic work of the rideshare campaign, such as counting and
recording raffle tickets each week, handling the budget, etc. This lack of available time exacerbated the problem of Joanne's lack of interest in a campaign plan.

Accordingly, the only time employees were reminded about ridesharing was when the newsletter came out. The newsletters, though generally well received, were published infrequently—about every three months—due to Joanne's limited time to work with the editor, and to the lack of much of anything to report.

In addition, the newsletters had some other problems that made them less effective than they could have been. The yellow paper, which came from the print shop's stockroom, was sometimes too dark, making the photos "muddy" by interfering with the gray tones. The paper also absorbed so much ink, because of its porosity, that the photos were made blotchy and even more unattractive. In the second issue, for example, the photo of a black woman came out as a silhouette with white teeth, causing her embarrassment and making the newsletter look not only poorly made but just plain silly.

Eventually, Katie selected a light yellow, coated stock which was special-ordered for the newsletter, but not until four issues had been printed on the other paper. The coating, which gives the paper a shiny, less porous surface, produces sharper, crisper photos.

Another problem with the newsletter was the inconsistency in tone that resulted when Joanne and her
assistant edited and rewrote the copy. Sometimes they changed very little of what Katie had done, but in several issues they changed the informal style to the administrative memo style they felt comfortable with. The amount of rewriting they did was often dependent on the political atmosphere produced by their upper management; when things were going well, they felt comfortable with stretching the boundaries of ABC communication. When things were tense, they retreated to the safety of the familiar administrative style.

The rideshare posters, which had been produced by the art department using the winning ideas from the contest, were not effective publicity tools, either. The ideas, selected by a committee of three employees who were thought to have a good background in design as well as a knowledge of the audience, were generally bland. The artwork was done in browns, grays, and other "earth tones," which blended in with the walls on which they were hung. They were also fairly small, about 18 inches by 20 inches—not large enough to attract much attention. Ideally, the posters should have been done in vivid colors on a large format, with bold, unusual themes. The timidity of the themes resulted from the fear of offending even a single employee. One of the themes chosen by the judges was the slogan "Make a Friend: Rideshare," with a drawing of two people chatting comfortably while driving. The Human Relations manager, who had final approval authority, rejected that on the basis that the term "make a friend"
might be interpreted as having a sexual connotation.

In addition to poor publicity, the program suffered from an inability to offer the incentives the employees said they would really like: cash bonuses (not just for the raffles), extra vacation hours, carpool parking spaces close to the building, and even a 4-day workweek (which has become increasingly popular at other companies as a way to achieve a higher AVR). For various reasons, the company was unwilling or unable to respond to these requests, and many employees were not excited about the raffle prizes.

Another possible tool for attracting employee interest, the lunchtime gatherings for people to meet prospective carpool partners, was never used, even though the idea had been approved as part of the committee's proposal. Here again, limited staff time and lack of management interest resulted in a loss to the campaign. Likewise, the "thank-you" picnic for rideshare participants fell by the wayside. The video was never produced, even though the cost was minimal compared to the rest of the rideshare budget. The small group meetings were never held.

In March 1990, nearly six months after the rideshare program began, Joanne sent out another survey to determine how many people were now ridesharing. This time, returning the completed surveys was mandatory, and the response was nearly 100 percent (some people were absent). The AVR, calculated using a complex formula provided by the SCAQMD, was
determined to be 1.1—representing an increase of only about 40 carpoolers—far short of the 1.5 goal.
Professional communicators in today's corporate environment have a wide variety of roles—from the technical communicator writing a hardware or computer users' manual, to the head of the public relations department in charge of developing and promoting a corporate image. While each situation is unique, the ABC rideshare program paradigm does provide a useful illustration of the wide variety of skills involved in almost any type of business communication.

Whatever his or her role, the communicator has to understand and work within the corporate culture and management philosophy to be effective. As demonstrated by the ABC program, the corporate culture defines the audience's attitudes and expectations, which in turn determine what kind of approach will be best received. In ABC's case, corporate culture precluded a dictatorial approach, or a "patriotic," "company loyalty," or "family" appeal for employee support. The culture also influenced the communications environment, which not only limited the channels of communication available, but was also responsible for Katie's powerlessness and restricted role; because communication was not considered important at ABC, the position of communicator was not considered important.

Management philosophy determines what the communicator
will be allowed to do, and sets the requirements for winning management support. At ABC, for example, the general manager’s low-key, “leave the employees alone and let them do their jobs” attitude influenced the committee’s approach to forming and presenting their proposal. Later, the loss of top management’s support, and Dave’s and Joanne’s administrative philosophy, resulted in an abandonment of the employee-based marketing approach originally planned.

At the beginning of the campaign, the actual communications (written materials, events, etc.) were planned with an overall strategy based on marketing and public relations principles, which include defining the problem and/or goal, understanding the audience, taking the rhetorical approach, choosing the best media, addressing the audience’s needs and desires, and getting their attention. The approach was initially successful in overcoming negative attitudes and creating an interest in the rideshare program. The all-hands meeting, newsletter, and brochure, all of which were different from the usual ABC communications, captured the audience’s attention and got their messages across.

The rhetoric had to be carefully considered and geared specifically to the ABC audience. The tone was informal and friendly, and fostered a feeling of camaraderie by emphasizing the role of the volunteer committee and avoiding the sense of a management dictate. In the written communications, the color of the paper and the types of illustrations used
had the same rhetorical elements.

The written communications also demanded careful consideration of design as part of the challenge of attracting attention. Straight text, or even text and photos used in a traditional, rigid, two-column format would not have had the same visual appeal. Since the artist who used the Macintosh computer to lay out the publications had no background in publications design, Katie had to be familiar with design principles that would get her message across to a visually-oriented audience.

Finally, throughout the experience the small group and interpersonal dynamics affected the success of the campaign. At the beginning, the ability of the committee members to reach a consensus and design a good incentives plan was dependent on strong leadership and the willingness of the individual members to work together. Unique to this situation was the communicator's (Katie's) position as one of the volunteers rather than as a formal part of the campaign. In this case, she had to use her interpersonal skills to convince the group to adopt her suggested communications approach. Later, the extent of her influence in the program was dependent on her interpersonal skills with the program administrators and coworkers such as the artist.

The point of this thesis is not that writing is no longer important; writing will always be important. However, good writing skills must not be considered the sole
requirement for an effective business communicator, but rather the starting point for a much more complex and challenging career. To prepare for such a career, English or Journalism students would benefit from management courses that include discussion of corporate culture; communications courses which include organizational and interpersonal dynamics; basic public relations and marketing courses; a course in theories of rhetoric; and an art or communications course in publications design. Also recommended are professional societies such as the International Association of Business Communicators, the Public Relations Society of America, and the Society for Technical Communications. In addition, the Bibliography lists many guides by professional communicators in the field, which include useful information on the topics described in this thesis.
Notes


2p. vii.


4Smith, p. 34.


7Goldhaber, p. 83.

8Sathe, p. 25.

9p. 10.

10Bailey reports that interest in ridesharing is less today than just two years ago, despite the increase in traffic congestion; that drivers don't clearly see any advantages; and that companies need to offer powerful incentives.

11Newsom defines six types of information campaigns: 1) public awareness, 2) information and awareness, 3) public education, 4) attitude and behavior reinforcement, 5) attitude change, and 6) behavior modification (pp. 295-296).

12Foltz states that the employee publication, often referred to as the "house organ," has been and in some cases is still considered to be the sum total of employee communication in many organizations. He adds, however, that in many cases the employee publication is undergoing a radical change, from reporting "birth, bowling scores, and babble" to tackling such issues as alcoholism and drug addiction, "burned-out" employees, and pay and benefits.

13Smith, p. 21.

14Emig, p. 123.

16 Goldhaber, p. 170.

17 pp. 275-318.

18 Foltz, p. 10 and Smith, p. 129.

19 Emig, p. 123.


21 Foltz, p. 7.


23 Dougis, Communication World, p. 42.

24 Phillips, pp. 5-6.


26 Smith, p. 46.

27 Wilson, p. 66.

28 Foltz, p. 10.

Bibliography


