Eric Zeitlin

Principles of Public Relations Com 230

Informational Interview paper

3/27/14

On March 6,2014, I had the opportunity to enrich my understanding of the public relations profession much deeper than ever imagined. At the beginning of the semester in my Principles of Public Relations course (Com 230) I was faced with a challenging, inspiring, and exciting assignment. The assignment given was to formally conduct an interview with a public relations professional whose daily duties were geared toward, that in which we are studying. This assignment was designed to give the student a better perspective on what exactly someone in the “Public relations”(PR) field goes through on a routine basis as well as giving us students a real life task that was completely in our hands to conduct.

When beginning to think about this assignment and what might be a good fit for my personal understanding of public relations, I began to look into organizations and institutions that are seen in a positive perspective from the public eye. This was not an easy task, but after a late night phone conversation with my father, a Police Officer who works for the Chicago Zoological Society at the Brookfield zoo in my hometown, I hung up the phone with a smile on my face and a light bulb in my head.

My plan was to research, brainstorm, and go into a detailed process to find out who the “public relations” department was at the Brookfield Zoo, then conduct a professional interview with them. After some research into the zoo’s webpages, I was able to locate the email address of Sondra Katzen, public relations manager of the zoo. I first emailed her and addressed the assignment, being one that requires an interview with a Public relations Professional in regards to a university level Public Relations course. I asked her if I could come in to discuss her profession, have a constructive, yet open conversation on topics ranging from her personal background in public relations, advice for present college students, daily routines, job description, pros and cons of the field, and anything else that came up. She was thrilled and more than happy to sit down with me, leaving me beyond excited for March 6, 2014.

“The mission of the Chicago Zoological society is to inspire conservation leadership by connecting people with wildlife and nature.” Said Katzen, Having personally spent numerous hot summer days and brisk winter evenings exploring the grounds of the Brookfield zoo, taking in the amazement of such beautiful wildlife it only seemed right for me to dig deeper into the management side of things at the zoo, to hopefully get a better grasp on what exactly a career in public relations is. March 6, 2014 around 1 p.m. I arrived at the South gate of the Brookfield Zoo with extreme nerves yet an overwhelming anticipation to get an inside look at how one of the nations leading tourist attractions sites handles its public relations side of things.

Once I made my way up to the third floor of the building where Katzen’s office was located inside the zoo, I began to settle in and the nerves went by the wayside as she made a joke about how many mannerisms my father and I share. The format of the interview was fairly simple.

We covered a little background of the Zoo, the job itself, her specific job, how she handles her job, the structure in which her job falls into, and ended with some light-hearted, fun questions that were still educational.

Ms. Katzen informed me that the Zoo opened in 1934 from land that was donated by Mrs. Edith Rockefeller McCormick. Edith Rockefeller McCormick had offered to give a large tract of land near Riverside Illinois to the Forest Preserve District of Cook County for the use as a Zoological park. The land was part of an even larger tract that had ben given to Mrs. McCormick by her father, John D. Rockefeller. The district would own the land and pay for the construction and maintenance of the buildings out of tax revenues. However the zoo itself would be privately owned by the Chicago Zoological Society, and would raise money through fees, dues, and contributions for the purchase and care of the animals.

After being informed on the history of the Zoo itself, Ms. Katzen then went into detail on her job title at the Zoo, “public relations manager.” March 4, 2014, marked her twenty-seventh year with the zoological society. After asking her about her day-to-day responsibilities she simply replied, “no day is the same” which I thought was very interesting. Her days consist of media interviews, commercial film, and dealing with newscasts such as NBC, ABC, and WGN, who come to the zoo to do news stories. The next question I asked her was about any other specific connections she had with other news agencies that she used to keep a positive media reputation for the zoo. Katzen said, “ TV news stations, print broadcasting, online broadcasting, National Geographic News Watch, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), The Smithsonian, and Animal Planet.”

I was extremely impressed with all of the connections that she had as far as getting the Zoo positive publicity, but wanted to know more, so my next questions involved how she kept a positive spin on things, particularly when the Zoo had major crises, and what she had to say next was unbelievable. Sondra gave me four examples of such emergencies each a major event that had taken place at the zoo while she has been there. The first was a national news coverage story that hit the front page of newspapers about a gorilla named Binti Jua.

Binti Jua was a female western lowland gorilla. On August 16, 1996, a very young boy visiting the zoo with his parents fell into the gorilla exhibit Tropic World. Binti Jua ran over to the crying boy and carefully cradled him and kept other gorillas away from him. When rescue workers arrived she brought the boy to them, completely unharmed. The incident received international attention in the media for Binti Jua, who also received special treats and attention from zoo staff for quite some time. It also started a debate as to whether Binti Jua's actions were the result of the training she had received from her keepers (who had taught her to bring her own baby Koola to zoo curators for inspection) or was it an instinctive sense of animal altruism.

The next case was a more recent event taking place in 2003 when an 11-year old grey wolf named Cinnamon Bear that had been placed in a closed off corner of the zoo for special treatment attacked a woman and bit her arm off. The woman, who was mentally unstable, had climbed over a 5-foot fence and reached through another 10-foot chain link fence before she was bitten, and zoo police were forced to shoot the wolf in the chest and kill it. This was the last of their northern grey wolves and was the first animal attack in the zoo’s 69-year history, which also made national news.

The third case, one that caused a lot of negativity towards the zoo, and placed lot of stress on Ms. Katzen was this past summer when the zoo hit one of its record attendances of 2.3 million. This caused an extreme traffic jam and wait time of two hours just to get out of the zoo parking lot. People expressed a lot of negativity towards the zoo with numerous complaints, frustrations, and disappointments being voiced.

The last case Ms. Katzen gave me that dealt with publicity was this past summer as well, and by far was the worst. A woman sat down on a park bench at the zoo, then later that week sued the Zoo for she had developed Tetanus-like symptoms, and thought she had gotten it from the zoo’s bench.

Following all of these stories Ms. Katzen simply told me one thing that she has done and will continue to do that seems to work in her favor when negative publicity hits: “Stick to the facts”. These were just a few events that have taken place over a long period of time. Generally the public sees the zoo from an extremely positive perspective. Examples of positive publicity include things such as birth of animals, youth science fair projects, weddings, celebrity visitors such as Michael Jordan and other professional athletes, and much more. Ms. Katzen told me that she and her marketing team just finished an online naming contest of a new baby gorilla. There were four names to choose from and the voters placed their votes via Facebook. The winning name was announced March 3, 2014, and baby Nora is the newest western lowland gorilla at the Zoo.

Covering the history of the zoo and her basic daily duties as the public relations manager as well as giving me a few jaw dropping examples of how things can go wrong, I was very pleased with my information and how she handles her self professionally.

Professional and personal lives can be very different. Ms. Katzen made a point that “it is very important to separate professional and personal life”, Katzen began as an assistant answering phones and taking down messages until her big break. Sondra’s big break was the Binti Jua gorilla case in 1996 that I mentioned earlier. She covered the entire thing from start to finish almost flawlessly. She insisted that she be promoted and recognized for her hard work on the case. Now that Ms. Katzen is well into her career I asked her a few personal questions, about her goals as a PR manager, her definition of PR, and three things she would have done differently, and the top three qualities to have along side a public relations degree.

Ms. Katzen said, “Long term there is not too much room for advancement, and short term goals would be to create a better working calendar, also ideas for boo-at-the-zoo, and holiday magic”, Holiday-Magic and Boo-at-the-Zoo are seasonal events around Christmas time and Halloween time that the Brookfield zoo does yearly and are major attractions. I then asked her what some real life advice would be for a college student getting a PR degree and she said “ get experience any way you can, intern, volunteer, etc.” A vey interesting response she gave; me when I asked her to tell me three things she would have done differently, she said, “Things have been smooth for the most part, I’ve been lucky, and just more hours in the day would be nice.”

When I asked her about her favorite and least favorite parts of the job she simple said, “least favorite are the crises and state of emergencies, which thankfully rarely happen, and my favorite part is the chance to work with so many great people, news stations, and just the relationships that she has formed with broadcasters” Before I ended the interview I had to ask what the top three qualities to posses along side PR degree and she said, “Balance, multitask, organization, communicator, creative, and have fun!”

Ms. Katzen falls under a structure in which she is a part of a team. That team consists of a director, a chief advisement office, a vice president of marketing and communications, and then her PR manager.

This assignment has helped me to demonstrated skills such as time management, organization, preparation, focus, and flexibility, all of which Ms. Katzen must posses on a daily basis for her career. I have now gained a real life look into the public relations profession and for that I am forever grateful.