The Responsible Media Communicator: Guidelines for Consulting in the Information Age

Judie Mosier Thorpe

Introduction

It starts quite simply. The professor of television production is asked to bring his or her students to film an annual awards banquet for a local company. An intern is assigned to write a videotape script on training assembly line workers for the company. Members of the media faculty involved in the new technologies are asked by the provost to implement the electronic mail system that will be available university-wide. A professor emeritus is asked by a large company to research, develop and produce what will become a videotaped annual report to employees. A recent graduate of a large midwestern mass communications department is asked to design a computer assisted instructional program for another company. Over and over, the same scenario is played as the entrenched forms of media as well as the new technologies are being utilized by organizations and institutions. The components are much the same despite the varying assignments; a media professional is asked to do external or internal consulting. Some would argue that consulting is consulting and that the rules for consulting in an organization are fairly much in place. This essay argues that media consulting requires adaptation. In sum, responsible media consultants must recognize and honor the ethical concerns of consulting and then adapt these to the special needs of clients and the constraints of technologies used. The information age is upon us and as Wilson P. Dizard, Jr. has argued, 'Success in our generation will depend on the degree to which we shape the new information technologies in accordance with human values. (Dizard, 1985, p. 9). More than just the new technologies, the responsible media communicator/consultants need to follow guidelines that will protect themselves and the organization they serve. To help meet this need, this paper will discuss the following topics: the increase in media use by organizations, particularly of the new technologies; guidelines suggested by organizational consulting that have been adapted to media; suggestions for future research.

Media Use By Modern Organizations

As Stewart L. Burge pointed out, "In the late 1960's and early 1970's many organizations jumped on the video bandwagon....Good video is not cheap, but many organizations have found that the costs of production and distribution are dollars well spent when measured by an 'effectiveness of communication' yardstick." (1985, p. 190) The new technologies are presently being surveyed more extensively. For example, Hellweg, Frieberg and Smith (1984) conducted a survey of Fortune 50 companies in the U.S. and discovered that interactive computers were found in nearly every major corporation and electronic mail is used in half of the companies. Two studies conducted in 1985 give insight into impact of the computer on the organization. In 1985, Purdue University surveyed 387 randomly selected manufacturers. The companies responding indicated that 33% had access to microcomputers, 51% had at least one supervisor who used a microcomputer, 63% had one or more supervisors who used a microcomputer or a mainframe. The trend however, is to move away from mainframes toward the personal computer. **Business Week's 1985 Guide to Careers** estimates that there are currently 5.5 million personal computers in offices in the United States, and within four years, the International Data Corporation expects that number to increase seven fold, to 35 million.

A second study reported in the September 16, 1985, **Wall Street Journal**, cited Dun and Bradstreet statistics showing that personal computers were used in the following manner: 65% for financial analysis; 73 % for accounting; 57% for word processing; 38% for data base management; 32% for inventory control, 14% for credit analysis and 23% for purchasing. These statistics support a survey by Honeywell Techanalysis reported in **Management Review**, May, 1985. (Bryan, 1986, 38).

Harvard Business Review has also commented on the significant impact computers are making as they grow more powerful, versatile, less expensive, and as people in organizations increasingly use them as a general purpose tool to gather and distribute information and to talk with others. In addition to message exchange and information retrieval, businesses are turning more and more to the computer for training applications. Leslie Bryan, Jr., Associate Professor in the Department of Supervision at Purdue University, has predicted that the increasing use of computers in the workplace will require increased training on computers. He argues that trainers must stay tuned to the direction their company is moving with automation. This will require the trainer to determine if training needs are with microcomputers or with remote computer terminals. In addition, they must constantly monitor areas of the organization in order to determine where computers will be productively utilized. (Bryan, 1986, 38-39).

Whether it be videotape, electronic mail, computer-based training, or video-conferencing, the media professional occupies an excellent position for offering expertise as an internal or external consultant. The trend is

moving toward increased job opportunities within organizations that widely use electronic media. With these consulting opportunities comes the responsibility for following ethical procedures, which currently are mostly left up to the individual. It seems timely, therefore, to suggest some guidelines.

Suggested Guidelines For Media Consulting

Before suggesting specific criteria to follow, we should review the research on consulting and identify some of the problems and concerns. Richard Eich conducted a national survey several years ago. He found that over half of the respondents mentioned exaggeration of expertness as a major unethical practice. Many consultants claimed to have expertise in areas, but in reality they lacked sufficient expertise to help the client. Additionally, Eich found that 78% of the more experienced consultants believed that consulting agreements should be put in writing and should include such items as pay and expenses, objectives, responsibilities, obligations, statements pertaining to expected time or duration of the client-consultant relationship. (Eich, 1977) These two concerns suggest several potential guidelines.

1. Responsible media consultants will not oversell their own expertise nor that of an intern they are placing in an organization.

2. Responsible media consultants will spell out the details of their activities for the organization in contract form. Included in this contract will be items such as time, compensation, materials provided by either the consultant or the client, and the specific job to be done. It is possible that a project may need to be done in stages with contracts written for each stage. For example, if the project is a videotaped annual report for employees, the first stage may be auditing to discover what employees wish to know about th company. The second stage may be writing the script. The next stage may be producing the tape, and a final s   ɔ may be distributing the tapes. If the project is complex, individual contracts may be useful for both the client a   the consultant.

3. Media consultants who are educators or media interns, v   ɔ wish to share their projects with an outside audience for educational purposes should clear this before enteri   into the consulting relationship. Eich discovered that 91% of the respondents he surveyed believed tha const   ng aided in teaching, while 81% reported that consulting helped in research. (Eich, 1977) Indeed, con ulting a ivities provide rich, real-world experiences that can be useful in the learning environment.

However, responsible media communicator/consultants also must preserve client confidentiality. For example, the author did some consulting for Procter and Gamble in Cincinnati. While many of the work experiences with this corporation can be shared in the classroom, information about product development or information that is not in the public domain have no rightful place in the classroom. To insure that no questions about integrity arise, perhaps the media consultant should leave all videotaped materials or research in the corporate facility.

This brings us to a discussion of a serious problem inherent in consulting with new computer-oriented technologies. That problem is computer security. These new technologies have created a security problem of potentially sensitive material. As Sherman argued in an article, "Is Your Vital Information Protected?"

> The increase in volume of information also has resulted in a corresponding increase in its importance. Gone are the days when customers were known by name and their records were determined by checking a sheet or two of paper. Now a customer's information is recorded on a multitude of media, including computers....That information, which contains an organization's valuable customer-account relationships and establishes its asset/liability position, has become its most valuable asset. Most organizations realize the need for at least some form of information protection, but they are unsure how to implement a program. (Sherman, June, 1986, p. 50).

Adding a more specific warning about e-mail and voice-mail systems, Wright affirms the reality of the security issue:

> Despite their advantages, both systems have problems to overcome, mainly concerning security. Although most message systems provide some security through identification codes and/or password requirements, users still can access each other's messages if codes or passwords are known. (Wright, June, 1986, p. 76)

Finally, R.E. Johnston, Contributing Editor to **Infosystems**, crystalizes the issue by saying that as technology continues to move at a rapid pace, security risks are left in its wake. Typical of these problems are PBX message systems that have long-distance calls charged to that system from external phones. Recently, the problems of penetration and sabotage of corporate message systems have surfaced. These problems range from the destruction of messages to the introduction of false messages or attempts at extortion. (Johnston, 1986, 35). This leads us to the fourth guideline.

4. Responsible media consultants and interns must abide by the client-consultant confidentiality rule and must not, in any way, jeopardize the organization's information. Although this may seem in tension with the previous

guideline, a basic rule to follow is to obtain prior clearance from the supervisor in charge before discussing consulting activities in the classroom. Some professors skirt this issue by not identifying the company by name in lecture. This is a risky practice because students may know the clients for whom the professor consults.

In addition to the above, guidelines already exist for providing training such as computer-assisted instruction or how to use new technologies such as electronic mail. Charles Redding authored them and Gerald Goldhaber published them in **Organizational Communication**. They are as follows:

5. Respect for the integrity of the individual (trainee)-trainees are treated with dignity.

6. Providing opportunity for self-actualization-training activities helps trainees reach their true potential.

7. Encouraging the exercise of critical faculties-trainers encourages trainees to keep an open mind towards the organization's goals by allowing ample opportunity for dialogue and expression by trainees.

8. Devoting explicit attention to ethical problems and issues—trainers include a discussion of ethics (applied to both the organization and the training experience) by de-emphasizing ends-over-means objectives.

9. Concern for long-term development of trainees—trainers keep trainees' career paths and potential in sight by linking the training to their future career goals instead of just their immediate jobs. (Goldhaber, 1986, p. 389)

If the media consultants are also employed as a faculty or staff member of a university, it is recommended that they check their faculty handbook or with their Dean or personnel department as to the consulting guidelines in place. This brings us to the next guideline.

10. The media consultant, if a university staff or faculty member, should adhere to the consulting guidelines in place. These guidelines or rules may vary from institution to institution with absolutely no rules at one school to very prescribed formulas and procedures at another. Eich, for example, in his survey found that consulting may or may not help advance one's academic career. The respondents were split with 50% thinking it advanced their careers and 50% believed it had no effect. Eleven percent believed it could be detrimental. (Eich. 1977) Responsible media consultants, if employed full-time, must make every effort to see that their consulting does not create problems or jeopardize either their employers or clients.

Directions For Future Research

This essay outlines suggested ethical guidelines for the media professional who either consults externally or supervises interns. We are on new ground, particularly in view of the new technologies that are diffusing rapidly. We need to start considering the ethical considerations before we come into a conflict of interest. As Hays has written of ethics for communications consultants:

> ....those principles and standards which guide the choices of alternative behaviors in the conduct of consulting with clients regarding the process of communication in an organization. Ethics here deals with the conduct that is approved or disapproved. It covers the range of any behavior that can be judged worthy or unworthy. What in the long range is judged good for the client, good for the consultant, and good for the profession, will be the criteria for the code of ethics....(Hays, 1972)

These ten guidelines are a beginning. What needs done now is to survey media professionals to discover the amount and type of consulting they do. In addition, we need to assess their problems and concerns and ascertain how they deal with them. Finally, continued efforts towards developing a list of guidelines are needed. In particular, these guidelines must be comprehensive and, at the same time, flexible so that they do not restrict the rich opportunity of real-world experiences for teachers and students.

Summary

This essay has argued that the responsible media communicator faces an organizational environment that provides rich opportunities for consulting. These opportunities may either be in the traditional media formats or with the new technologies. In order to maintain ethical standards, ten guidelines have been posited as a beginning point for media consultants who work in academic settings.

As Dizard has argued, "Here is a challenge to match the promise of our democratic society as we move towards a new century. In little more than a generation, the technology to match this challenge has moved from the laboratories into everyday use....The United States has expanded its information production to the point that it is now the repository of the largest share of the world's organized knowledge." (1985, p. 17)

As teachers and researchers of media, we are often challenged and privileged to share our knowledge with the American organizations that are commanding this power. Whether we are providing production support or pedagogical services, we need to think about our responsibilities to assure that our future as consultants continues.

Bibliography

Bryan, Leslie A., Jr. (1986, July). Supervisors With Micros: Trends and Training Needs. **Training and Development Journal**, 40, No. 7, 38-39.

Burge, Stewart L. "Audiovisuals". **Inside Organizational Communication** edited by Carol Reuss and Donn Silvis, Second Edition. New York: Longman, 1985.

Chester, Jeffrey A. (1986, May). Technology and Top Management. **Infosystems 33**, No. 5, 34-35.

Dizard, Wilson P., Jr. **The Coming Information Age: An Overview of Technology, Economics and Politics.** Second Edition. New York: Longman, 1985.

Eich, Ritch. "Communications Consulting Practices: State of the Art." Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1977.

Feuer, Dale, Jack Gordon, Ralph Pribble and Ron Zemke. (1986, March). Computers: Most Users Need Only Basic Training. **Training**, 23, No. 3, 14-15.

Feuer, Dale, Jack Gordon, Ralph Pribble, and Ron Zemke. (1986, March). A Standard for Videodiscs: Will the Army Do It? **Training**, 23, No. 3, 15-16.

Feuer, Dale, Jack Gordon, Ralph Pribble and Ron Zemke. (1986, January). Computer Literacy: Making "Easy" Learning Easy. **Training**, 23, No. 1, 14-15.

Feuer, Dale, Jack Gordon, Ralph Pribble and Ron Zemke. (1986, February). CBT: Authoring Styles for the New and Nervous. **Training**, 23, No. 2, 70-71.

Ferrarini, Elizabeth. (1986, August). Getting the Most from Online Databases. **Administrative Management**, XLVII, No. 8, 28-31.

Field, Anne R. and Catherine L. Harris. (1986, August 25). The Information Business: Despite a Slow Start, Many Still See a Bonanza in Selling Electronic Data. **Business Week**, 82-90.

Finlay, Douglas. (1986, November). Facsimile and Electronic Mail: Providing Better Accuracy and Speed for Tighter Communications. **Administrative Management**, XLVII, No. 11, 17-22.

Galati, Tess. (1986, October). Electronic Communication: Implications for Training. **Training and Development Journal**, 40, No. 10, 42-44.

Goldhaber, Gerald M. **Organizational Communication.** Fourth Edition. Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown, Publishers, 1986.

Gordon, Jack. (1986, April). Why CBT Isn't Just for Training Anymore. **Training**, 23, No. 4, 43-50.

Gordon, Jack. (1986, October). Where the Training Goes? **Training**, 23, No. 10, 49-81.

Gross, Lynne Schafer. **Telecommunications: An Introduction to Radio, Television, and Other Electronic Media**, Second Edition. Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown, Publishers, 1986.

Hays, Ellis. "A Behavioral Objectives Approach to the Development of a Code of Ethics for Communication Consultants." Paper presented at a meeting of the International Communication Association, April, 1972.

Hellweg, Susan, Kevin Freiberg, Anthony Smith. "The Pervasiveness and Impact of Electronic Communication Technologies in Organizations: A Survey of Major American Corporations." A paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Meeting, Chicago, 1984.

Johnston, R. E. (1986, December). The Risks of Change: Technology Continues to Move at a Rapid Pace, Often Leaving Vulnerabilities in its Wake. **Infosystems, 33**, No. 12, 35.

Kiesler, Sara. (1986, January-February). The Hidden Messages in Computer Networks. **Harvard Business Review,** 64, No. 1, 46-60.

Kimmerling, George F. (1986, March). Gaining Firm Ground. **Training and Development Journal**, 40, No. 3, 22-25.

Kliem, Ralph L. (1986, May). Overcoming User Resistance to Microcomputers. **Administrative Management**, XLVII, No. 5, 52-54.

Laird, Dugan. **Approaches to Training and Development Revised Second Edition**. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1985.

Lee, Chris. (1982, April). Adding the New Technology to Your Training Repertoire. **Training**, 19, No. 4, 18-26.

Mamis, Robert A. (1986, April). Managing Technology: Expect More from Those CDs. **INC**, 108.

Mortensen, Erik. (1986, June). One Network. **Administrative Management**, XLVII, No. 6, 39-46.

Mallach, Efrem G. (1986, November). The Truth about Training for Computer Sales. **Training and Development Journal**, 40, No. 11, 54-59.

Parson, Frederic W. (1986, September). Inexpensive Interactive Training. **Training and Development Journal**, 40, 9, 38-39.

Paznik, M. Jill. (1986, June). The Automated Office: Make Computers and Software Easy, Then See If There's a Slump. **Administrative Management**, XLVII, No. 6, 8-9.

Redding, W. Charles. "The Ethical Considerations of Consultants and Graduate Students in Organizational Research.' Paper presented at a meeting of the International Communication Association, April 1972.

Rice, Ronald E. & Associates. **The New Media: Communication, Research, and Technology.** Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985.

Ross, Earl R. (1986, November). I'm An Electronic Mail Freak: To Find Out What Features You Do and Don't Need, Heed the Advice of a True Enthusiast. **Infosystems**, 33, No. 11, 56-57.

Schiller, Zachery. (1986, August 25) Mead Makes Information Pay—Most of the Time. **Business Week**, 90.

Settle, Peter L. (1982). Organizational Communication: Curricular Concerns, Practices, and Problems. Paper presented at Central States Speech Convention.

Sherman, Lloyd E. (1986, June). Is Your Vital Information Protected? **Administrative Management**, XLVII, No. 6, 50-51.

Siemasko, Dan. (1986, December). CBT Fantasies: The Ground Beckons. **Training**, 23, No. 10, 79-86.

Siragusa, Gail. (1986, April). Voice Mail Takes Off. **Administrative Management**. XLVII, No. 4, 43-48.

Spitzer, Dean. (1986, June). Five Keys to Successful Training. **Training**, 23, No. 6, 37-39.

Stein, Jess, Editor. **The Random House Dictionary**. New York, Ballantine Books, 1978.

Thorpe, Judith Mosier. (1986, Fall). Electronic Mail, A New Media Technology Making Its Way from a Cubicle in Academe to the Corporate Setting. **Journal of the Tennessee Speech Communication Association**, 12, No. 2.

White Collar Productivity: Putting Office Automation in the Hands of Those Who Can Maximize Its Potential. (1986, January). **Infosystems**, 33, No. 1, 56.

Wright, Jan. (1986, June). E-Mail and Voice-Mail Systems: Conspirators or Competitors? **Infosystems**, 33, No. 6, Part 1, 74-76.

Zemke, Ron. (1986, September). The Rediscovery of Video Teleconferencing. **Training**, 23, No. 9, 28-43.