The strategic construction of intended meaning in Australian public relations campaigns through the use of key messaging and positioning techniques

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by

Melanie Brigid James

BA (Hons) in Communication (UTS), MA in Journalism (UTS), Grad.Cert.PTT (UoN)

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Name:   Melanie Brigid James
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This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Frank and Joan Skillen.
Abstract

The project aimed to determine the underlying purpose of Australian award-winning public relations campaigns and the means by which the purpose was achieved. It sought to explore the phenomenon of why a major part of public relations work, that of campaigns, is not well accounted for in the dominant normative theory of public relations—the two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 22). This model does not accommodate much of the campaigns’ practice as reported in the literature and elsewhere and this has implications for teaching, researching and practising public relations. A qualitative thematic analysis of Australian public relations campaign practice, as reported in 57 national award-winning campaign entries and in 18 interviews with award-winning practitioners, was undertaken. The common purpose of the campaigns was identified as being to construct versions of social reality through having target audiences and publics construct particular meanings that would facilitate the achievement of stated organisational goals. Positioning and the use of key messages in campaigns emerged as key techniques in constructing these meanings. Drawing on the field of personal positioning in social psychology, a conceptual framework for intentional positioning in public relations was developed to begin to account for this practice technique which has previously been underexplored in the public relations literature. The framework requires further testing but indications from this project are that it will assist in the design of intentional positioning strategies and also provide a breakdown of the components of intentional positioning. This could facilitate researching and teaching this aspect of practice but may also provide a means by which this part of practice can be worked through with clients and appropriately billed. The framework also provides a rationale for why the use of key messaging techniques in public relations is central to many campaigns. This thesis suggests a more appropriate definition of campaign practice whilst questioning whether campaign responses to public relations situations and problems are always appropriate. It explicates intentional positioning techniques in campaign practice that have previously received little attention in the literature, and further supports the adoption of a social constructionist theoretical approach to teaching and research in public relations campaigns.

Keywords: public relations, strategic communication, positioning, key messages, meaning, campaigns, social constructionism.
Refereed publications resulting from this thesis work:

To date, I have published two journal articles, a textbook chapter and two conference papers largely drawn from this doctoral thesis work. All work has been peer reviewed prior to publication. The publications are:

**Refereed journal articles**


**Refereed conference publications**


**Refereed chapters in books**


Copies of these publications, apart from the book chapter, are included in Appendix G.
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“Designing and implementing campaigns fills the lives of public relations professionals around the world”

– Sheehan, 2009, p. 12