**COMM 3014: Public Relations Case Studies**

**CASE BRIEF**

**Case 29: Hallmark Writers on Tour: Connecting Employees with their Hometown Audience**

*Summary of the Case*

Perhaps the most recognized brand name in the greeting card industry, Hallmark has usually been at the top of their game, holding 50% market share in the U.S. for greeting card sales. However, what happens when these sales slow to the point of needing redemption? With individuals’ busy lives, high prices of postage, difficulty finding news value in greeting cards and the rise of electronic communication, it seemed as though Hallmark didn’t stand a chance.

Despite these obstacles, Hallmark was determined to reinvigorate the greeting card industry. In a world in which almost everything is online, Hallmark decided to do the one thing that could bring the tradition back: to organize an in-person tour. Named the Hallmark Writers Tour, the company’s writers went on the road for a unique **community relations** effort described as a “creative card-based publicity campaign to promote sales” (456).

Global agency Fleishman-Hillard was responsible for developing the media tour. The campaign served as a way for consumers to express their Hallmark greeting card stories, which were used for news coverage in the media. Hallmark writers were consequently inspired by their stories, and the campaign created an effective employee relations program that reassured employees of their important role in the company. These two occurrences worked hand in hand to reinforce and personalize the Hallmark brand, and prepared them for future promotional endeavors.

The company set up pilot events and chose Writers on Tour market locations based on the following research considerations: media receptivity, heavy consumer card purchasing, “hometown” connection between writers and the market and nearby location to a Fleishman-Hillard office. Hallmark also aimed to find casual venues as opposed to their own commercial stores to create a more comfortable feel for consumers to open up about their own personal stories.

In the end, Hallmark made 77 appearances in 15 markets within 19 months. Hallmark conducted surveys to measure the success of their campaign and found that 83.5 percent of people strongly agreed that the events allowed them to see the significance of greeting cards.

*Analysis of the Case*

Before launching the Writers on Tour campaign, Hallmark established a key message to convey to all media outlets and audiences: “This tour is not only about sharing how we work at Hallmark, but also about listening to real people talk about how cards have made a difference in their lives” (460). Hallmark aimed to make their own brand authenticity the core of the campaign. The company practiced effective public relations in doing so by creating an in-person tour, which established one-on-one conversations between Hallmark’s writers and their consumers, therefore reinforcing the greeting card’s valuable purpose of personal communication. They also designed a website called Hallmark’s Meaningful Moments, with one of the stories being recreated into a television commercial.

As with any campaign, Hallmark began with research in order to ensure that their Writers on Tour events would be a triumph. Research revealed that it was difficult to find news value in greeting cards unless the card was associated with a holiday. Hallmark nevertheless strived to demonstrate the inherent value of greeting cards to their audiences, and they did so by gathering the personal stories of greeting card buyers. The company also set up pilot events as a sort of focus group or beta test, which allowed them to make any changes in the future, help writers become confident in their roles, choose effective venues and recognize which parts of the program were most meaningful to guests.

Hallmark was successful in identifying their audiences and used a variety of strategies to attract their publics, which included invitations to Hallmark Gold Crown members, advance media relations stories, fliers in Hallmark Gold Crown stores, fliers at event venues and affinity group outreach. The diversity of their tactics allowed them to reach a wide range of people from different backgrounds all coming together to realize the same message. The invitations they sent out to Hallmark Gold Crown members showed Hallmark’s devotion to their loyal customers and created an opportunity for consumer participation.

Publishing advance media relations stories was also an important communication strategy. This action is directly linked to **agenda setting theory**, which allowed Hallmark to reach more people. The media played a key role in publicizing the company’s efforts and sharing stories of greeting card users. With the help of the media, “more than 131 million media impressions resulted from top-tier media coverage about the Writers on Tour project” (459). Attention came from major outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New Yorker*. Although the project gained a national stage and was covered by a plethora of large media companies, Hallmark’s campaign message remained the same throughout ninety percent of the news coverage—the work done at Hallmark, listening to real peoples’ stories and making a difference in their lives.

**Systems theory** is also very much present in this case. Hallmark is highly dependent on its team of “625 artists, designers, writers, editors and photographers” which is why the campaign was largely focused on an employee relations program while also emphasizing the consumer. Hallmark’s efforts to manage these vital relationships was a clear indicator of effective public relations strategy. Consumers were able to feel a strong connection to the brand while employees were told in person how much their work positively affected individuals’ lives.

As Hallmark continued to spread their positivity, people became receptive to the greeting card industry. A campaign survey indicated that respect for creating greeting cards increased to 95 percent, and within a week of an event, 50 percent of people said they purchased or used a greeting card more than normal. The results were telling—Hallmark was reinvigorating the greeting card, and it was all thanks to their promise to remain supportive of their employees, and even more importantly, authentic.

The model present in this case is the **two-way symmetrical model of public relations** because Hallmark communicated with its consumers and employees, and in return, they communicated back with meaningful stories and renewed purpose. Hallmark engaged in research to determine which settings would be most comfortable for its consumers to share these stories, building a mutual understanding. Although Hallmark hoped to convince its publics to accept their way of thinking about the greeting card, the communication was not inherently one-way, because Hallmark genuinely wanted feedback from its publics.

The PRSA Code of Ethics also plays an important role in this case, especially the value of **loyalty**. Hallmark is true to those they represent (their employees) while also serving the public interest (the consumer). Their loyalty is shown through reaching out to its Gold Crown members, listening to its consumers and ensuring that its employees understand that they are an irreplaceable asset.

Hallmark’s campaign in conjunction with Fleishman-Hillard was no doubt a huge success. However, every campaign can be improved in some way. Although Hallmark sought out casual venues to ensure comfort of speakers, they avoided hosting events in their own stores, which in itself is a “hallmark” of their company. Receiving a nice greeting card from someone on a holiday, birthday or in the mail is a nice gesture, but the reality is that communication is shifting entirely online, and Hallmark must make a decision. This involves the **contingency theory**, and whether Hallmark will stay on the side of advocacy or move entirely towards accommodation.

Despite these criticisms, Hallmark witnessed unprecedented sales in greeting cards. Steinberg puts it best: “We laughed, we cried, and sometimes we scratched out heads…but mostly we marveled at the way greeting cards touch people in strange and wonderful ways” (459).

*Discussion Questions*

1. Was Hallmark truly “authentic” in their approach and why or why not?
2. How did the employee relations program place importance on Hallmark employees?
3. Using facts and statistics from the case, was Hallmark successful in their mission?
4. Due to this campaign, is the greeting card industry still thriving today? How?
5. When was a time that a greeting card impacted you?

References

Swann, P. (2014). *Cases in Public Relations Management: The Rise of Social Media and Activism* (2nd Edition).New York, NY: Routledge.