



In search of message design best practices: The Silver Anvil Award winners archive

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ABSTRACT

We investigated specific award-winning public relations efforts to derive best practices that bridge industry practices with academic research and pedagogy. The data for this project were the winning entries for the annual Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) Silver Anvil Award, which is considered the top award recognizing excellence in public relations. We found, however, that the archive of award winners does not provide sufficiently definitive information about what defines any public relations discourse genre or why any genre as used is "excellent." This archival research provides us with a key rationale for employing rhetorical, narrative, and linguistic theories *prospectively* to guide public relations message design and planning, theories which hitherto have been used to judge campaigns post hoc or retrospectively.

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When it comes to ready examples of public relations discourse—"excellent" examples—the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) has an archive of all Silver Anvil Award winners, dating back to the first competition in 1947. The archive is kept at the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison, Wisconsin, which was arranged in 1963 by the late Scott Cutlip, who was on the faculty at the University of Wisconsin and very involved with the PRSA (Jonathan Nelson, personal communication, June 16, 2010). In our research about public relations strategy and discourse practices, we felt this archive would be a natural place to look for examples—even standards—of discourse that were judged by public relations professionals as "excellent," because the Silver Anvil Award is considered the top award recognizing excellence in public relations.¹

Specifically, we believed Silver Anvil winners would provide us with best practices for public relations writing—that we could divine from them discourse categories and, especially, discourse conventions because they were the best of the best of public relations practice. Instead, the archive of PRSA Silver Anvil Award winners failed to provide specific information about what precisely are the characteristics of "excellent" public relations and, most important, strategic insights about message design. Accordingly, we argue it is essential to move beyond the archival data with the help of several fields of study—basic rhetorical, narrative, and linguistic theories—and demonstrate the strategies available to inform public relations message design are more varied and, especially, truly usable in public relations planning than what is typically thought.

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1. The Silver Anvil archive

We had two objectives for our archival research: (1) to identify patterns of excellence based on judging criteria and actual winners' examples for each classification of public relations work and (2) to define an initial taxonomy about discourse practices per genre from the award winners. Our sampling frame was the entire archive of all Silver Anvil winners, and our data were the actual texts filed within them. Our approach, after becoming familiar with the archive's cataloging system, was to conveniently select multiple winners from each decade and examine them for their contents and, especially, discourse examples.²

As we examined the winners, we found the archive organized by year and category, and the archive only contained the entries themselves. There are no documents about how judges evaluated any entries (i.e., feedback on score sheets or evaluation forms). Also missing in the archive are the calls for entries for each year of the Silver Anvil Award. However, we did happen to find two calls for entries from 1979 and 1980. Indeed, these two calls for entries reveal that the judging criteria changed in 1980 from three (i.e., research, planning, and execution) to four (i.e., research, planning, execution, and evaluation). Prior to this change, evaluation was merely part of the execution criterion. Interestingly, the PRSA does not have records about past calls for entries (and thereby judging criteria) and only retains documentation about preparing entries (also called "study guides") for the Silver Anvil Awards since 2002 (Gladiiss Gressley, personal communication, July 16, 2009).

Our observations of the archives suggest that these campaigns indeed demonstrate the tactics used as the *sine qua non* of discourse conventions in use by public relations practitioners. But in the end, we could not fulfill our objectives through our research. We expected that the award winners would reveal consistency within discourse conventions and documentation of message and discourse effectiveness from judging, ratings, and comments. Without feedback from the judges, there is nothing to indicate what made any Silver Anvil entry "excellent" or award worthy. The dearth of criteria (even within calls for entries) also make it difficult to infer on what grounds any discursive practices could be determined to be better than any other. Best practices are therefore not defined directly through any award winner.³ We can, however, at least rest assured that the entries are examples of the best of public relations practice for a given year, if only because they won a Silver Anvil Award and the winners are a matter of record with the PRSA. In this way the winning entries can be used no differently than any other examples of public relations discourse: Generic characteristics must be inferred from them as discourse exemplars that exhibit similar patterns of structure, purpose, content, style, and audience.

During our process, we hoped there was an archive of PRSA's Bronze Anvil Award winners as well. After all, this award is meant to recognize annually the best individual examples of public relations discourse by type (press release, speech, newsletter, etc.). Although there is a record of winners of the award, we found that no archive of winning entries exists, and, if we would like to see any award winners' entries, we would have to contact the winners themselves and ask for permission to see their work (Randi Mason, personal communication, July 15, 2009). There is also no guarantee of seeing any judges' feedback about the winners, if such feedback was given.

In the end we are left with two conclusions about Silver Anvil Award winners. First, they reveal best practices and professionalism based on campaign inputs, throughput, outputs, and outcomes, consistent with the RACE model and similar theory-based approaches. We expected to see more of a business case made for the quality of any campaign's performance, but that was not the case, even for winners from the last two decades. The archive contains only the raw entries that have won the award over the years. Second, Silver Anvil winners do not give us information about (1) specific characteristics necessary for any public relations discourse to be identified as one kind of discourse over any other or (2) how best to ensure that the use of any genre can be used effectively to fulfill the objectives for a particular situation. Again, only the entries themselves are collected and no additional information about why any entry was worthy of the award is contained in the archive.

2. What next?

Without established criteria for what defines any discourse type and what constitutes "excellent" public relations, what can we do? The best we can do is lean on expertise of public relations professionals and look at exemplars of writing practices. This approach has been normative over the years. However, it remains for the public relations educator to teach and, subsequently, well-trained practitioners to employ principles drawn from public relations, rhetorical theory, and other communication fields to supply the reasons behind the tactics (i.e., *strategies*). Strategic message design relies not merely on the forms of public relations genres, but also their functions. For example, it may be common practice to invoke within a news release the values shared between an organization and its publics. However, the strategy behind this tactic is Kenneth Burke's (1950/1969) concept of *identification*, which we will address later on. Additionally, a practitioner may insinuate the

² It is important to note that, although all Silver Anvil winners from 1947 to 2004 are in the archive, the winners from 2005 onward are not yet formally cataloged, but they are accessible as unsorted and noncataloged records (see the Wisconsin Historical Society's online catalog at <http://arcatalog.library.wisc.edu/>).

³ We also observed two other important characteristics among Silver Anvil Award winners. First, there appears to be little or no connection or parallel with APR requirements, especially for the most recent years for which APR requirements are accessible. This point is important because, if excellence is to be understood at the practitioner and the practice levels, they ought to be in sync. And second, the emphasis in winning submissions seems mostly to be on tactics overall. In other words, it seems, even for the most recent entries, the flashier an entry's tactics, the better.

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