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Introduction & Background

Cal Poly Open House has existed in various shapes and forms here since 1904, beginning as a “Farmer’s Picnic” that focused on agriculture events, food, and campus tours. Nine years later, the event had grown into the thousands, and by 1933, Poly Royal was born. For nearly sixty years, Poly Royal existed as a weekend event that served as a “country fair on a college campus” (“Cal Poly Open House History”). But by 1990, the event grew so large and rambunctious that there was a riot and vandalizations that year, and thus the event known as Poly Royal was cancelled. Four years later, Open House was created as an event that encompassed aspects of Poly Royal and the original Farmer’s Picnic, and with a more specific focus on attracting newly admitted and prospective students to choose Cal Poly. Since then, Open House has continued to grow and just celebrated its twenty-first year. The weekend now draws over 40,000 visitors to the San Luis Obispo community and the Cal Poly campus. The event is put on by a committee of roughly twenty volunteer students, with help from graduate student assistants and one full-time staff member.

As it came time to make plans for my senior year extracurriculars in spring 2013, I knew being a part of the Open House Committee at Cal Poly was something I was interested in. After being involved in other programs under the Orientation umbrella, including being a Week of Welcome leader and holding a position that trains the leaders themselves, Open House was essentially the only thing left. Funnily enough, among the various orientation programs at Cal Poly, Open House actually aligned most with my interests – particularly event planning.

Qualifications

Because of my past leadership involvement in Orientation Programs, internship experience with The Walt Disney Company in both marketing/promotions and operations, and upcoming senior status, I felt qualified and confident to apply for a Committee Lead position. In the hierarchy of the Open House Committee, there are two student co-chairs of the entire event, five subcommittee leads, followed by three to five committee members in each subcommittee. I completed a written application, where I ordered my preference of committees to lead. For my first choice, I selected Promotions, Marketing, & Communications. I went in for an interview with the co-chairs, and a couple of weeks later was notified that I received the position of Promotions, Marketing, and Communications (PMC) Committee Lead. Randy Fujishin suggests to “accept a position of leadership only for a group whose purpose you believe in deep in your heart” (148). I had wanted to be involved in Open House since my freshman year, and I truly felt that it was an organization that I could be an asset to and also help me develop skills that would go hand-in-hand with some of my career goals.

I soon realized that this was something I could potentially turn into my Senior Project. It would be a true “learn by doing” experience and a way to apply the communication principles I have learned over the past four years to a practical application that benefits the university. Plus, I love getting people excited about an event, and showing off Cal Poly to prospective and incoming students is something I am passionate about. Being a Communication Studies major, the Promotions, Marketing, and Communications position was relevant to my studies and also to my career goals post-graduation. Having this experience as an Open House Committee Lead would give me real-world experience in the communications field and be an appropriate capstone project to round out my time at Cal Poly.

After solidifying that this could be my senior project, I thought about what communication principles are most utilized in my role as PMC Lead. After going through the entire planning and execution process, I realized that many communication principles were used in my role, including social media and other forms of technological media, persuasion, marketing higher education, and small group dynamics.

Social Media

I can say with confidence that social media was the biggest part of my position this year, and the main focus of the PMC committee itself. Although a majority of time spent in my position was delegating tasks to my subcommittee members and following through with them, I also gave myself some tasks. I didn't want to feel like I was just delegating and passing everything off; I wanted a share of work to do. Since I felt like my greatest strength and skill was in social media, I wanted to focus on that. I like writing, and connecting with others, and getting people excited. I'm also a visual person. Using these skills to enhance the presence of Open House on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram made me excited.

The year prior to this, the Open House Facebook page made a handful of statuses, and approximately ten Twitter posts. This year, the full-time staff member Jason Mockford – whose official employee title is Orientation Programs Coordinator – wanted to take our social media to the next level; it was one of his main focuses for the year. In October, assigned me the task of creating a social media plan with an social media update every single day starting in November and leading up to Open House itself. I admit that I was overwhelmed. Usually, I make my own social media updates on a whim, based on the situation and what I am doing in that present moment. It was the first time I was faced with having to plan these fun, engaging posts in

advance. This was a challenge! But I was willing to take it on. From being a young in age but experienced user of these platforms myself, I knew what style of posts I liked from organizations and had observed the style of syntax that was appropriate for them.

Since the early days of the Internet, “participatory culture was the buzzword that connoted the Web’s potential to nurture connections” and “build communities” (Van Dijck 4). But this participatory culture soon changed to a “culture of connectivity” which comprised of “an ecosystem of connective media with a few large and many small players” (Van Dijck 4-5). For the sake of time and to access the broadest audience, we focused on the big three: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These social network sites “promote interpersonal contact” and “encourage weak ties” (Van Dijck 8). I wanted to give Open House greater interpersonal contacts among the Cal Poly and San Luis Obispo community, even if it was through a weak tie such as a page or post like. Increasing exposure and interaction was a main goal because the Open House social media efforts had been so minimal before.

I knew that current social media trends were very visual, especially with the rise of Instagram. Image-based posts captured more attention and got more “likes,” from my observations. Although it was purely anecdotal, I knew I wanted to focus on having a lot of pictures used in the Facebook updates, because text-based statuses would get more easily lost in the constant stream of peoples’ News Feeds. When I was creating the social media calendar in October, I was just trying to fill up all the days. I thought of a campaign called “Get to Know Your Open House Committee!” which featured a picture of the committee member and a short biography of random things, such as favorite movie and color. Then, these posts could be cross-posted to both Instagram and Twitter. I also wanted to feature a “Throwback Thursday” every week with a picture from past Open Houses. Those posts were usually quite successful.

Overall, the popularity of the posts throughout the year was steady. Through my management of the Facebook page, our number of likes increased from just over 400 to 726. The figure below shows the steady increase of likes leading up to Open House weekend.



Figure 1

The figure on the following page is the “Post Reach” for the Cal Poly Open House page’s posts. We did not use any money to fund greater post reach; everything was from people organically sharing and liking these posts. The spikes in the graph were when I posted high-quality pictures from previous Open Houses for “Throwback Thursday,” or particularly popular “Get to Know Your Open House Committee!” posts. Of course, the posts directly before and during the actual event had the highest reach, at over 1,000 people.

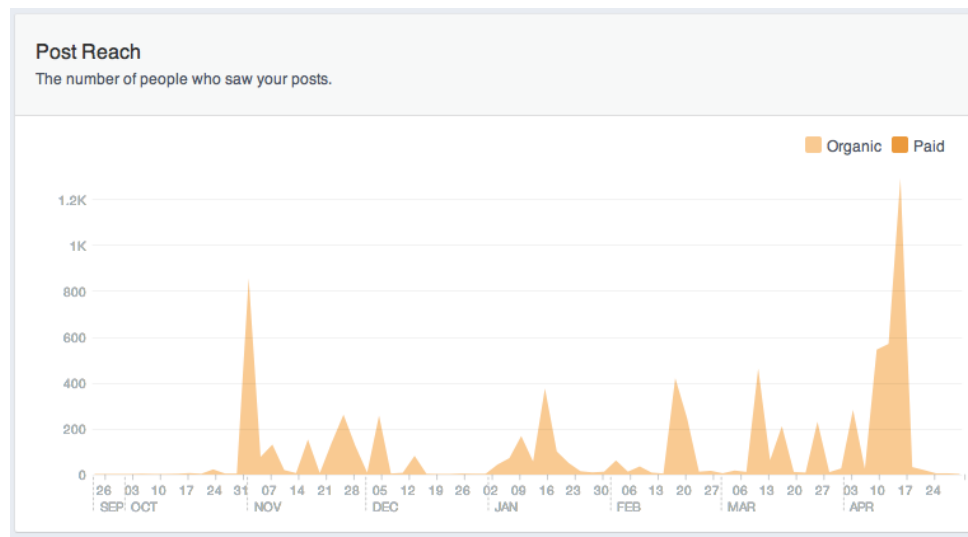


Figure 2

There were a few reasons gaining more likes on our Open House Facebook page was important. The first was that with more likes, we have a higher reach and audience, like displayed in the graphs above. The second has to do with the concept of social proof, where we “view a behavior as more correct in a given situation to the degree that we see others performing it” (Cialdini 116). Robert Cialdini also describes this as “the tendency to see an action as more appropriate when others are doing it normally” (116). With increased likes on our Facebook page and posts, others would see it and feel greater influence and acceptance in liking it too.

Anecdotally, I can say that when a page has a higher number of likes, I give it a greater sense of legitimacy. This was also my strategy for the Instagram during the weekend itself, when I was frequently updating it with pictures on the handle @cporientation. We designated a hashtag, #CPOH2014, as the one for all programs to use on any Open House related post. But when posting, I also used any other related hashtags I could think of, such as #calpolyopenhouse and

#calpoly, so that people searching and using those hashtags would also be able to find my Instagram posts.

The third aspect I utilized in gaining more followers and likes was the concept of liking. In the compliance setting of liking, there is reciprocity, commitment, and social proof (168). I knew I had to bring the “attraction, the warmth, the security, and the obligation of friendship” to our social media presence (Cialdini 168). I used a positive tone in all our posts, and retweeted others posts about Open House and followed people and liked their pictures on Instagram on the @cporientation account. Another positive thing I could take advantage of when making the posts was the aspect of liking regarding similarity. Because “we like people who are similar to us” and I’m also a Cal Poly student familiar with social media trends, syntax, and what makes an effective post for college students, I used that to create a page style and posts that appealed to the prospective student audience – young men and women around age seventeen and eighteen, excluding transfer students (Cialdini 173).

I’m proud that with all our other tasks to complete, we had a successful social media campaign. I had the most fun with the social media tasks during the weekend itself, when I would take pictures and Instagram them immediately, and “live-tweet” the various events happening over the weekend. It was very “in-the-moment” and more of what I was accustomed to in terms of my own social media use. It looked like I was on my phone the whole time – but I was really doing Open House related things! Our coordinator Jason Mockford gave me the go-ahead to have a bit of personality on the tweets and Instagrams – more than the typical bland, corporate cheeriness one often sees on posts from organizations. I wanted to set our posts apart from the constant feed of messaging that people receive through social media every day. After the weekend, Jason made a comment that he wished the other people in charge of updating the

social media in Orientation Programs were as savvy as me. I call that a success, and I'm glad I could use it towards such a great event like Open House. For next year, I recommended that one committee member on PMC have their job be completely dedicated to social media. With one person's time and effort devoted to only that, without other distractions, I believe our social media presence could expand even more.

Marketing & Communications

The marketing collateral that my committee was in charge of producing, or coordinating the production of, included the event poster, t-shirt, brochure and overview of the weekend, individual college schedules, a promotional video, postcards sent to admitted students, and press kits. The press kits included a press pass, the overview schedule, all of the press releases, Jason Mockford's business card, and an Orientation Programs pen inside a Cal Poly folder. All of these marketing aspects exist to put forth a positive and overarching image of Cal Poly Open House.

Eric Ancil researched marketing and advertising in higher education and said "higher education is an intangible product working for market differentiation in a crowded field" and that "the customers are students, but they are also the products" (89). We are "social institutions. . . forced to behave like modern businesses" (89). He found that the essentials for higher education marketing "are about understanding the 'product,' defining the central message, and creating memorable images that an audience can associate with the. . . university" (89). In our case, our product is a sub-category, but Open House nonetheless serves as a crucial weekend for advertising the university. Student organizations and the colleges work extremely hard to put their best foot forward and show what they have to offer potential students — from the rodeo to

the robotics competition and everything else in between. Having all of these things on display over the weekend creates a memorable, exciting image for people to take home with them.

Anctil recommended creating a “positive common image that is easy to communicate to all audiences” (90). The Open House poster is created by Graphic Communication students in one of their classes. Dean of Students staff and the Open House Committee decide the winning poster. After selection, the logo from the winning poster is used for everything Open House related, creating a streamlined and recognizable display for all Open House products and collateral. Anctil stresses that students are different from the traditional customers in a traditional business model. The first reason being that “they are often confused about what exactly they are looking for” combined with “the magnitude of the decision, the complexity of the choices, and their uncertainty about what they need lead to great parental involvement for many prospective students” (92). The people involved in putting on Open House are keenly aware of this. Even the word “parent” is going out of style in terms of political correctness — we use the word “supporter” in all of our collateral to include all types of families, since not everyone has a mother and/or father in the picture or present.

Most importantly, “the search for a good fit often comes down to the campus visit” and is the event “where the student experiences what has largely been an abstraction and allows them to test the assumptions they have carried” (Anctil 93). Thus, beyond the marketing collateral that my committee created, the entire event of Open House is essentially one grand advertisement for Cal Poly to convince prospective students to attend and put on a good show for the community, who are often only exposed to the more negative aspects of living in a town dominated by college students.

On the communications side of my committee's tasks, we put out three press releases throughout the year, announcing the theme, special events, and grand marshal. They had to go through a multi-level process before being approved – our committee's drafts were looked over by one of the co-chairs, who routed it to Jason Mockford, who could then forward it to Matt Lazier, Cal Poly's Media Relations Director. We also had to put together information binders for various stations on campus such as the Recreation Center and Administration building, which had any sort of information both staff and visitors might need to know if a question came up — maps, schedules, frequently asked questions, and more.

Overall, my experience with the marketing and communications side of this position was interesting. There was a lot of bureaucracy to work through, and although I consider myself a task-oriented person, there were often more people involved in one project than I was accustomed to. But I attribute part of this to also being a student, having a part-time job, and other extracurricular activities. Sometimes I found it difficult to juggle it all and remember everything I had to get done, even with the help of my great committee. My small group experience with them actually made the entire year bearable, manageable, and fun.

Small Group Communication

As a leader for a committee of three, one could say my most important task was creating a functional, supportive, and productive dynamic for my committee. Randy Fujishin discusses the importance of the difference between being a leader and leadership. Leadership, he says, is the “process of influencing the task and social dimensions of a group to help it reach its goal” (134). For me as a leader, crafting a social dimension that created an open and comfortable vibe within our group was important to me, and “without a healthy, supportive social climate. . . task

effectiveness can be compromised” (Fujishin 154). LaFasto and Larson’s six dimensions of being an effective team leader are defined as someone who focuses on the goal, ensures a collaborative climate, builds confidence, demonstrates sufficient technical know-how, sets priorities, and manages performance (2-3). I feel that I at least adequately addressed these six dimensions. Technical know-how wasn’t my best, because of my lack of experience regarding Open House and its mode of operations, along with my inability to use Adobe Creative Suite. However, I had people around me that were familiar with these things and that I could work with and was supported by.

After finding out who was on my committee, we had time to bond at the Open House Retreat at Camp Ocean Pines in Cambria. The ages, majors, and interests of my committee members were all very different, which later in the process I tried to utilize for task assignments. They are also all female, which I considered a benefit. Although having both genders on the committee would be great too, having all females was a positive because of the gender differences that can come up in group situations. One of these differences is in conversational strategies, which can sometimes cause conflict in groups. Women use more “cooperative strategies” that emphasize “establishing rapport, asking questions, listening without interrupting, being supportive, agreeing, complimenting, and sharing feelings” (Fujishin 46). My committee acted this way, and by the end of the year, I not only had three great committee members, I also had three great friends.

LaFasto and Larson identified five qualities that make effective team members: experience, problem-solving ability, openness, supportiveness, action orientation, and positive personal style (1). I found that each of my committee members excelled at each of these qualities. Getting to know them individually and gaining a greater understanding of how each of

them worked and how we could work together was a joy throughout the year. Each woman was so versatile and different, but we meshed easily.

Chelsea is a fifth year — older than me — and in the credential program to be an elementary school teacher. Chelsea and I were both on WOW Team 2012, so we had worked together previously. Interestingly, while on WOW Team we were not particularly close, and I remember sometimes feeling like we viewed situations and processes from very different perspectives. At first, I was uncertain how working with her and being her leader would go, simply because I felt like we approached conflicts and managed tasks quite differently. Later, I would discover that despite our differences, Chelsea and I could complete Open House tasks together efficiently and successfully. We were able to communicate quickly over email, and although every so often she would miss our weekly meetings because of student teaching, Chelsea was incredibly self-sufficient and was able to get things done and be on top of her tasks without me having to remind or “babysit” her. Because Chelsea had such a demanding schedule outside of her Open House duties, I gave her tasks that could be done in a sort of “freelance” way — electronically, on her own time, and/or without requiring fixed meeting or location requirements. She wrote the first two press releases and put together the letters and posters we send to high schools around California.

Kirsten is a third year Graphic Design major. As soon as I learned her major, I knew she would be a great asset to the committee. Although Open House uses student employees for creating most of our marketing collateral, having someone on my committee with the skill, creativity, and knowledge required for graphic design was important. I knew I could use her as the main contact between our committee and the Orientation Programs Marketing student employees. Kirsten worked with them primarily on the shirt design. Kirsten also was the main

contact for our newspaper ads. We had digital ads placed on the websites for the *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Sacramento Bee*. She communicated with the employees of each company about prices, sizing, and other options, then worked with the marketing team to create an ad that fit the required specs. Kirsten was the all-star of my committee. She was always willing to pick up the slack if the rest of us didn't have time to complete something, and was prompt, responsible, organized, and had a positive attitude. I actually recommended to Kirsten and next year's Co-Chairs that she apply for my Lead position for next year's Open House Committee. She would be great and having prior experience on the committee would be beneficial.

Lexi, the third committee member, is a freshman Business major. She was one of two freshmen on the committee, who applied when they came to Cal Poly in the fall. Lexi likes making videos, so right away I knew she could focus on making our promotional video and other audio/visual related business. Lexi is enthusiastic, flexible, and caring. Although she was intimidated at first, she grew into a confident and knowledgeable committee member. Randy Fujishin talks about the importance of feeling support, through "communicating empathy, communicating caring, and giving assistance" (161). Recently, Lexi called me on a Friday night upset about something unrelated to Open House. She just wanted an older, wiser friend to talk to. I was so glad she felt comfortable enough to call me in that situation, and it made me feel proud that I created such an open environment for her.

I got very lucky with having such a cohesive committee. We had little to no conflict, and reached consensus easily and without tension. I am confident that my committee members felt that we all had "successful cooperation, connection, appreciation, support, and trust derived from the group experience" (Fujishin 154). I made the effort to compliment everyone's effort and

achievements throughout the year. Fujishin says that “public complimenting. . . builds solidarity and goodwill within the group” and I tried to thank everyone often. At the end of the year Open House banquet, I got each of my committee members a bouquet of sunflowers and a goody bag of treats with a detailed thank you note inside.

In their note to me during Lead Appreciation Week, my committee wrote “your smile brightens our days” and said I was “supportive” and never failed to “drop everything when they had a question or a problem with something and that I “truly made PMC feel like a little family within Open House.” I thought it was a great reflection on the environment I tried to create within my committee, and I encouraged “each member’s personal growth and development” which is one of the “most sacred responsibilities as a leader” (Fujishin 140). I wanted to allow my committee members to take charge of their own tasks, so I could focus on mine and also allow them to feel fully in control of what they were working on — with me there as a resource in case I was needed. Gloria Galanes examined dialectical tensions of small group leadership and defined group leaders as those who “help their groups overcome obstacles to goal attainment, communicate a sound grasp of the group’s task, and mediate information and ideas supplied by members” (410). She also found four specific factors that create effective leaders: “establishing a project’s overall intention and clarity of vision; building the team; continuously monitoring and adjusting their behavior to adapt to the group’s interaction; and keeping the group focused on its goal” (410). As the committee lead, it is sometimes harder to reflect on one’s own performance, but I think I successfully did each of those to be an effective leader myself, particularly the first one. Each committee’s success and direction is ultimately up to the lead — there is a lot of freedom the higher-ups give to the leads, which is empowering for the leads themselves and

ultimately the committee members. It is a trickle-down style of self-direction, ideas, and implementation.

Was the concept of groupthink an issue in my committee? Groupthink is when a group “experiences extreme cohesiveness” (Fujishin 164). I do not think so. Fujishin also noted that “groupthink doesn’t manifest itself very often in problem-solving groups at work or school” (164). Signs of groupthink include “[thinking] no harm can come to it...[pressuring] its members towards conformity...[and being] closed-minded” and I wouldn’t say we experienced that (Fujishin 165). We were just four women that worked and played well together — and it made for a great group experience all year long.

Conclusion

My experience as the Promotions, Marketing, and Communications Lead for Cal Poly Open House was very positive. Despite having no experience on Open House Committee before, and coming in as a Lead, I felt supported and guided by those around me. I was always comfortable going to the Co-Chairs for clarification about any of my committee’s tasks. I would recommend being a part of the Open House Committee to anyone looking to get involved more on campus.

The position also gave me valuable insight into my future career. I always thought I would be interested in marketing, social media, and public relations, but through this experience I learned that it possibly is not the direction I want to go. Sometimes I felt limited and uninspired, but perhaps it was because it was my first experience having a new social media voice and learning to be very mindful of everything I posted under the Open House account. I also wonder if I learned I am simply not as interested as I anticipated in marketing and

advertising for higher education. Either way, I am still not exactly sure, but gaining this experience is one step in figuring out what I want to do.

Using the position as my senior project was a great way to round out my four years at Cal Poly and put what I've learned in my studies of communication into practice. Having the opportunity to reflect on those principles in this paper helped me realize how interconnected the practice of communication is in everything we do, and I will carry that forward with me — no matter where I end up in my career.

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