

Teaching Brief/GIFT

Integrating Corporate Ethics and Border Privacy Cases into PR Pedagogy

Sheila B. Lalwani, University of Texas at Austin

ABSTRACT

This teaching brief outlines the banking data breach scandal as an instance of a border privacy and corporate ethics crisis communication case taught to undergraduates. In this assignment, students analyzed and presented the scandal to hone skills necessary for ethical and practical public relations crisis communication management and leadership. Skills emphasized in this assignment were critical thinking, memo writing, and public speaking. Four parts characterize this teaching note. Part I introduces the course within the university, the learning goals, and the key theories emphasized. Part II outlines assignment details. Part III summarizes student performance. Part IV reflects on this lesson and concludes the brief.

Keywords: privacy, data breaches, crisis communication, public relations

Responding to a contemporary demand to train emerging public relations professionals in corporate crises, this teaching brief details the experience of instructing undergraduates on a public relations crisis surrounding a financial institution. The importance of instructing public relations students in digital privacy and data protection crisis communication cases has reached a new tenor. Such instances have become more common. In 2022, Verizon documented 5,212 data breaches, up from 4,145 in 2021 (Verizon, 2022). These figures underscore the importance of continuous cybersecurity vigilance, but they also highlight the vulnerability of personal and digital privacy, their intersection with corporate crises, and the value of instructing PR students to lead in such moments.

This teaching brief presents the experience of teaching one such border case. It presents the case of the scandal, an instance of a venerable financial institution fraudulently opening millions of accounts without their customers' knowledge or consent while charging them fees. There are, unfortunately, many cases of privacy and data protection breaches from which to select, but this instance is compelling for several reasons. For one, the case is relatable: nearly everyone has a bank account with a financial institution. Almost everyone can imagine what it might feel like to have their financial data compromised or misappropriated. Two, the case presents a hybrid case that incorporates corporate ethics, reputation management, and consumer trust, which parallels individual and data privacy challenges facing public relations professionals. Three, the hybrid case also spotlights the catastrophic consequences that follow when corporations violate consumer privacy ethics. From a teaching perspective, the scandal has also matured sufficiently for students to draw on scholarly research and non-academic literature in examining the case. At its heart, this border case is more than an example of fraud; it presents an instance of the vital role public relations expertise can play in managing corporate crises and the importance of ethical decision-making to leadership. These skills are vitally important to impart to emerging professionals.

This teaching brief proceeds as follows. Part I outlines the rationale for the assignment, proceeds with a description of the university, and concludes with details about the course. Part II explains the assignment. It details the core learning objectives and assignment parts. Part III imparts student performance at each stage of the assignment. Highlighted in this section are the initial reactions to the assignment, outcomes of the one-on-one sessions, quality of the memos, oral presentation, and Q&A session. Part IV concludes with a reflection on the assignment and the potential of incorporating cybersecurity cases into undergraduate education more widely.

Part I: The Rationale for Integrating Privacy Cases Into PR Pedagogy and University Overview

The field has started to recognize the importance of public relations expertise in cases involving privacy and cybersecurity. Westin (1967) defines privacy as an individual, group, or institutional claim to determine when, how, and to what extent information about them is released to others. This definition directly maps to data privacy and cybersecurity. Cybersecurity refers to the “art of protecting networks, devices, and data from unauthorized access or criminal use and the practice of ensuring confidentiality, integrity, and availability of information” (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, 2021, para. 1). Cybersecurity is critical for financial institutions to protect sensitive data. Betkier (2019) asserts that data privacy depends on personal autonomy. It follows that data privacy is placed in an individual’s autonomous control over personal data (p. 23). This necessarily includes identifiable information, addresses, and financial information.

A January 2025 article in *Modern Marketing* reports that public relations experts can play a role in helping firms mitigate risk, noting “the challenges of securing sensitive information are not only technical in nature; they also require strategic communication and a comprehensive approach to managing perceptions, relationships, and crises (Torossian, 2025). Anecdotally, a basic Google search yields multiple professional

public relations positions that require experience in privacy and cybersecurity. Such positions seek professionals at various career stages. This highlights the value of instructing hybrid crisis communication cases.

As the field calls for public relations experts trained in cybersecurity and privacy, it builds upon a call for active learning evident within PR pedagogy. Coombs and Rybacki (1999) suggest that PR pedagogy emphasizes active learning, while Botan and Taylor (2004) remind us that public relations pedagogy is not separate from the academy due to the tools, theories, and concepts inherent in the discipline. Yook (2024) documents that active learning strategies strengthen student mastery of crisis management theories and practices. The 2023 Guidelines for Certification in Education for Public Relations encourage educators to adapt to shifts in the profession, while the Commission on Public Relations Education and the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications have similarly emphasized the importance of linking theory to practice (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.; Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, 2025). These paradigms thus welcome the incorporation of privacy cases into public relations pedagogy.

For students engaged in this assignment, such issues are not merely esoteric but germane to their immediate and long-term career goals. This upper-level, semester-length course was taught every semester to undergraduates at a New England university that emphasizes business and liberal arts. Recognized for churning out high-achieving, business-minded undergraduates, students join this university planning to enter the corporate world. Career training and placement begin in the first year and last throughout the duration of their college careers. This preparation includes intensive training in business writing and composition. Students also took separate classes in accounting and finance. Prior courses introduced students to the concepts related to business ethics. This

included stakeholder theory, utilitarianism, and justice theory by their senior year.

The integrated marketing and communications course was required for all business, finance, and accounting students and draws on foundational concepts in public relations. This course stressed theories foundational to rhetoric and persuasion. Heath (2009) notes that a rhetorical perspective lends itself to a deductive and rational basis for the ethical practice of public relations. Heath (2009) further contends that leveraging rhetoric in public relations engenders environments in which ideas are debated and decisions made collaboratively. This course also explored image restoration theory and corporate apologia. Benoit (1997) describes image restoration theory as image repair strategies that take the nature of attacks or complaints into consideration (178). Benoit (1997) describes that in these attacks, the accused is held responsible for an action and the action is deemed offensive (Benoit, 1997). Hearit (2006) situates corporate apologia within crisis communication and avers that a calamity involving stakeholder expectations constitutes a significant threat to an organization's social credibility. Erickson (2021) emphasizes the primary importance of communication to leadership, transparency, and authenticity. Arendt et al. (2017) assert that apologia can help organizations move past crises. These theories map to real-world dynamics in crisis communication and cybersecurity cases for their direct application. They address newer challenges in a digital world, as privacy violations become more frequent. Students who presented the case were required to outline their strategies to mitigate the fallout.

The assignment's learning goals were outlined in the syllabus. The primary goal was to train the next generation to develop their communication skills. The four primary competencies covered were writing, oral presentations, visual communication, and listening. Students had four major assignments that emphasized informative writing and

presentations, structured messaging, and an understanding of ethics as a central tenet of leadership. Readings from scholarly outlets and mainstream sources characterized the course literature. Students gained practice through the in-class exercises and the classroom discussions to prepare for the final assignment. Combined, these experiences underscored the value of active engagement.

As many as two dozen students can register for the course. Given the breadth of the field, instructors had some latitude in how they taught this course and the cases that they selected. A notable feature of the class is the use of the cold-calling method. On the first day of class, the instructor informed students that they would be cold-called upon in class to review the readings and share their insights. The questions revolved around reviewing the readings and sharing their insights. Dallimore et. al. (2013) detail that the cold-calling method facilitates broader classroom participation and prepares students for active participation. For the final assignment, cold calling facilitated class discussion on core learning goals.

Part II: The Assignment

Students first heard about the final assignment during the initial week of class and again at various points throughout the term. The financial scandal was one of three cases from which students could select for the final assignment. The significance of this case underscored its selection: The discovery that the venerable financial institution, known for its customer service, had opened millions of fake accounts due to internal pressure. The scandal is a financial fraud scandal, but it is connected to privacy, too. Over 60% of the students selected the case. The assignment required students to incorporate and articulate ethical reasoning into their communications strategies. The assignment served as the final major writing project in the course, with more than half of the students graduating and preparing to enter the corporate world. The assignment

specifics – the learning objectives, memo, professor consultations, and presentation – follow.

Learning Objectives

The case served as a final practice platform to prepare learners for professional careers. The assignment objectives were to:

- Identify central issues and central stakeholder concerns.
- Develop analytical writing skills in crisis communication scenarios.
- Gain further practice with effective oral presentations.
- Integrate ethical reasoning into their assignments.
- Benefit from peer-to-peer collaboration on their assignments.

Introducing the Assignment

The Memo

Each student was required to write an 850-word memo the case and elaborating on the identified privacy violations. The basis of the memo was to address one stakeholder group, i.e., account holders, shareholders, and the public, and assess how they would repair the institution's reputation with that group, drawing on PR strategies. Students could pick any stakeholder group, but to keep this group as the basis for the entire assignment. The assignment required 7 to 10 scholarly sources from peer-reviewed journals.

We reviewed the memo assignment in class and went through each of the details. This part of the assignment was worth 15 points. Each memo was required to include a title and a reference list. The formatting and citation expectations for the memo adhered to APA 7th edition. The memo required students to double-space their documents and write in 12-point font. The assignment awarded two points based on clarity, conciseness, and comprehensiveness. This part was worth three points. The instructor allotted six points for analysis and use of sources.

To familiarize students with memo writing, the course utilized the Policy Memos Resource, available through the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Students received time in class to craft their memos, feedback through consultations, and a tutorial on proper citation in formal documents. The deadline for submission was 8:59 p.m. on the day before the class presentations.

Consultations

Before submitting their memo, students signed up for a one-on-one 15-minute coaching session with the instructor two weeks before the assignment's due date. Students received a sheet in class with a list of times to schedule a session at their convenience. Students were encouraged to bring their drafts or a working outline to the session. The overarching goal was to offer draft-specific feedback. Students received five points for attending the session.

In-Class Oral Presentation

The in-class presentation consisted of three components: an oral presentation, a PowerPoint slide presentation, and a Q&A session. For the oral presentation, students presented their work before the class in business attire. They engaged with the class by posing questions to the audience or showing a video. A class member timed each presentation and raised their hand to signal a one-minute warning. Another member of the class tabulated the number of "ums" and other filler words that the presenter spoke.

Students used the 7th edition APA style and submitted materials before class. The presentation was also worth 15 points. The evaluation criteria revolved around depth of research, delivery, and professionalism.

Q&A Session

After making their presentations, presenters took questions from classmates, allowing them to elaborate on their research. The instructor

also asked questions. Students had up to two minutes to answer each question. This portion was worth five points. Each assignment element was intended to enhance student learning in research, critical reasoning, stakeholder analysis, and leadership.

Part III: Assignment Performance

Initial Reaction

Students perceived the assignment as a natural conclusion to the class. Introducing the assignment through the initial weeks and then mentioning it at various points in the term, combined with introducing exercises to prepare them for the assignment, left little room for shock. Students received the assignment but asked questions along the way.

Memos: Every student conducted research and prepared their documents in preparation for the final submission. Many included image restoration and apologia in their memos. They incorporated a range of scholarly and non-scholarly sources. Introducing students to memo-writing resources elevated the quality of their memos.

Consultations: These improved the overall quality of the various elements of the assignment. Many brought an outline or a working draft of their memo to the session. Feedback revolved around encouraging students to clarify their points and articulate their specific approach to regaining trust. Consultations supported students who brought an outline to think through the organization and sources.

Oral Presentations: Students presented the crisis, provided an overview of the case, and profiled those most impacted. Most of the students selected shareholders or accountholders as their primary stakeholders. Oral presentations included well-designed PPTs. Students also presented their analysis and strategies. Slides were also “text-light.” Students drew on corporate apologia, transparency, and authenticity effectively in their memos and in-class presentations.

Q&A: Following each presentation, each student fielded two

questions from their peers. This aspect of the assignment enhanced comprehension of the material and encouraged analytical thinking that builds on the “cold calling” technique employed in the class. No cold calling was necessary, as students had prior practice engaging with their peers.

Part IV: Student Debrief and Conclusion

During the final few minutes of class, for a debriefing session, students recognized that this assignment emphasized technical content and ethical, social, and business dimensions – aspects recognized as essential in cybersecurity education and vital to PR education (Cai, 2018). They critically outlined the ethical and cultural failures, digging into the unrealistic sales targets and unhealthy corporate culture that contributed to the crisis.

Students enjoyed analyzing others’ cases and noted how their approaches helped cement their learning regarding the cross-cutting nature of the assignment. The participatory element of the assignment kept them engaged. Students acknowledged that stakeholder responses challenged them to create internal and external communication messaging that would repair morale. For example, one student expressed concern that the companies had not taken appropriate steps to protect account holders’ privacy. Students pointed out that the breaches necessitated corporate change.

Students also commented on their peers’ presentations, noting the strengths of the strong presentations while pointing out techniques they planned to incorporate in the future. For instance, one student recognized an excessive use of “ums” in their presentation. Another student pointed out that practicing their presentation beforehand helped calm their nervousness. One remarked that they needed to improve their PPT skills.

The iterative nature of this assignment guided students through a

relevant case they may confront professionally. The regular feedback loop, as illustrated in the memo, presentations, Q&A sessions, and debriefs, demonstrates the alignment of developing students' crisis communication and reputation management skills in handling complex cases involving ethics. Course evaluations similarly highlighted the iterative nature of the assignment, solidifying key concepts and improving overall performance. The case offers students a meaningful learning opportunity to merge central public relations theories with ethical decision-making and communication. This assignment, in effect, served as a continuation of the skills students had first learned when they arrived at the university. In summary, this teaching note highlights the critical importance of incorporating real-world crisis communication cases into PR instruction. The spike in privacy violation cases presents an obvious opportunity for instructors to respond by introducing students to privacy and other cybersecurity-related issues in a lab-like environment, such as a public relations classroom.

Recommended Resources

- Harvard Kennedy School. (n.d.). *Policy memos resource*. Harvard University. <https://policymemos.hks.harvard.edu/home>
- Anderson, C. (2013, June). *How to give a killer presentation*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2013/06/how-to-give-a-killer-presentation>

Acknowledgments

The author extends appreciation to the reviewers of the Journal of Public Relations Education for their generous feedback and gratefully acknowledges the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at the Moody College of Communication, the Cyber Student Fellows Program, and the 2025 AEJMC Diversity and Inclusion Career Development Fellowship for their support and encouragement.

References

- Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications. (2025). *About ACEJMC*. <https://www.acejmc.org/about/fact-sheet>
- Arendt, C., LaFleche, M., & Limperopulos, M. A. (2017). A qualitative meta-analysis of apologia, image repair, and crisis communication: Implications for theory and practice. *Public Relations Review*, 43(3), 517–526. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.03.005>
- Benoit, W. L. (1997). Image repair discourse and crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*, 23(2), 177–186. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(97\)90023-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(97)90023-0)
- Betkier, M. (2019). *Privacy online, law and the effective regulation of online services*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781780689371.003>
- Botan, C. H., & Taylor, M. (2004). Public relations: State of the field. *Journal of Communication*, 54(4), 645–661. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02649.x>
- Cai, Y. (2018). Using case studies to teach cybersecurity courses. *Journal of Cybersecurity Education, Research and Practice*, 2018(2), Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.62915/2472-2707.1041>
- Coombs, W. T., & Rybacki, K. (1999). Public relations education: Where is pedagogy? *Public Relations Review*, 25(1), 55–63. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(99\)80127-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(99)80127-1)
- Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. (2021). *What is cybersecurity?* Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. <https://www.cisa.gov/news-events/news/what-cybersecurity>
- Dallimore, E. J., Hertenstein, J. H., & Platt, M. B. (2013). Impact of cold-calling on student voluntary participation. *Journal of Management Education*, 37(3), 305–341. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562912446067>

- Erickson, S. (2021). Communication in a crisis and the importance of authenticity and transparency. *Journal of Library Administration*, 61(4), 476-83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2021.1906556>
- Hearit, K. M. (2006). *Crisis management by apology: Corporate response to allegations of wrongdoing*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Heath, Robert L, and Øyvind Ihlen. 2018. "Public Relations and Rhetoric." In *The Handbook of Organizational Rhetoric and Communication*, edited by Robert L. Heath and Øyvind Ihlen, 51–66. Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119265771.ch4>
- Public Relations Society of America. (2021). *CEPR certification in education for public relations: Guidelines 2023*. https://www.prssa.org/docs/default-source/prssa-docs/chapter-firm-resources/ceprguidelines-2021.pdf?sfvrsn=2135bb6e_6
- Torossian, R. (2025, January 8). *The future of cybersecurity PR: Emerging trends and the increasing need for strategic communication*. Modern Marketing Today. <https://modernmarketingtoday.com/the-future-of-cybersecurity-pr-emerging-trends-and-the-increasing-need-for-strategic-communication/>
- Westin, A.F. (1967). *Privacy and freedom*. Atheneum.
- Verizon. (2022). *Data Breach Investigations Report* (15th ed.). <https://www.verizon.com/business/en-gb/resources/2022-data-breach-investigations-report-dbir.pdf>
- Yook, B. (2024). A sequential approach in crisis communication: Integrating case study, press conference simulation, and media training guidelines. *Journal of Public Relations Education*, 9(3), 121-140. <https://journalofpreducation.com/?p=4312>