

Poor Advice for Aspiring PR Practitioners

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Once upon a time, an out-of-work journalist was desperate to find a job. Much as it pained him, he wrote letters to PR agencies to see if they might hire him. One agency responded but told the journalist it had a project and no permanent employment. The agency wanted the journalist to ghostwrite an opinion piece on bank loans for a local Chamber of Commerce publication. The journalist panicked. He knew nothing about bank loans or business, but he took the project anyway. (He needed the money.) Before he began writing, he looked up everything he could find about loans. Writing was a struggle but he finished the essay and turned it over to a senior agency executive. The executive read the piece and said with amazement, "You know about loans!" With that, the agency hired the journalist and put him on staff in the investor relations department.

This is a true story. I was the journalist. I was so ashamed of my ignorance that I subsequently studied for and received an MBA.

So, when young college graduates approach me and ask what they need to do to get into PR, I tell them... What do I tell them?... I don't know. How I entered PR is improbable, and it would not help them. For young persons who have graduated and are knocking on doors, I'm often mute. Their tale of struggle is familiar but the environment has changed.

Little in PR is the way it was. The PR agency business in the 1970s was a mom-n-pop field with hundreds of small agencies, few of which were big enough to rate as mid-sized businesses. Small PR agencies today are over-shadowed by communications combines with global aspirations and activities. Budgets have gone from tens of thousands per year to hundreds of thousands and millions. The large brands haven't called themselves PR agencies for quite some time. They are communications firms: They focus on reputation management. So they say. Most appear to be marketing-support providers because marketing programs tend to be the largest and most lucrative business (until a recession hits.) The truth is, I barely pay attention to the agency business. It's boring and an atmosphere of who won what accounts, who lost, who's in and who's out. The real world is that of clients whose businesses are interesting to learn. Knowing the media is important too because they are a conduit through which many clients' messages are transmitted. Little of this helps aspiring PR practitioners, however.

So, what might be advice to young graduates searching for a job? I can only speak for agencies in which I've worked. They wanted someone who could do client work with a minimum of training, someone they could put into service and start billing.

A youngster didn't have to be a great writer or a great pitcher of story ideas, but he or she had better learn fast. It wasn't how the person interviewed but how the person worked that was key. It was a question of how fast they picked up skills, the extent of their initiative and their ability to get jobs done right with a minimum of supervision. One

boss used a rule of thumb in determining which juniors would make it and which would be let go. I've never found a better measure. He rated juniors by how much agency managers asked for their services. If everyone wanted to use a junior, that person stayed and was promoted. If no one wanted the junior, that person was let go. It was Darwinian, but it worked. Juniors who made themselves useful showed the adaptability needed for agency work.

A youngster needs a mixture of fearlessness and audacity to survive the first years of the agency business. There should be an eagerness to tackle projects and to learn new skills. The danger is that a junior gets pigeonholed. E.g., an account manager needs someone to do media follow-up calls and assigns a junior to the task – and nothing but that – month after month. The junior wants to branch out, but the manager won't provide other assignments. It is up to the junior to force the issue – or leave. Most juniors with whom I've worked bump against a ceiling at some point and stay there. Their inexperience shows and/or they don't want to go farther. A few continue to grow and become Jacks or Jills of all trades, perfect for the agency business.

What skill sets define them?

Writing is one. The ability to write a persuasive press release and media contact letter (e-mail) is always difficult to find. Many juniors never learn to write well, even if they had worked first in the media. (It was eye-opening to discover ex-reporters who could not write a decent press release. Their editors apparently had saved them in their careers.) And, even if juniors could write well, they often couldn't recognize newsworthy ideas. An ex-reporter usually had this skill but could fall into a bad habit of hyping rather than finding good stories that embody the PR message.

Media targeting is another. Smart juniors learn this skill early on. They research and know what a reporter likes before picking up a phone or sending an e-mail. Some juniors never grasp this skill. It seems boring and unnecessary. Their bosses, moreover, are mass mailers at heart. Their bosses believe if one sprays enough e-mails or paper, one is bound to find a reporter willing to write the story. The idea that a PR practitioner often has one call to make is foreign. Besides, it looks more productive, if one could say he contacted 300 reporters rather than 10. Clients, on the other hand, get wise when there are only one or two stories produced from hundreds of contacts.

The ability to pitch a reporter, sell a story idea and then, to see it through to publication will always be valuable. Media contact, however, is where many PR practitioners fail because it is hard. There are practitioners who will stare at a phone because they can't bring themselves to pick up the receiver and dial. There are other practitioners who, as they rise in the ranks, give up media contact because they "don't have to do it anymore." I was terrified of having a phone slammed in my ear or of not knowing what to say if a reporter queried me. I over-prepared but the outcome was the task of follow-up calls assumed monumental proportions. What if she asked me this? Or that? How should I begin the conversation? What if the reporter doesn't care? What happens if the reporter says no? I had days when I was too frightened to do follow-up.

Success is important: Boasting isn't. If one makes a placement, that is one's favor. If one works with a range of personalities and keeps them happy, that is another positive. If one is eager, prepared and enthusiastic, these too are bonuses. There should be no reluctance to stay late and arrive early, if that is what the job requires. A junior should keep up with the news and how it affects clients. A junior should send creative ideas to the account manager to show one is thinking about the client and client service. Although no one is indispensable, a junior should strive to be embedded in client work, so that when cut lists are prepared, agency managers go to bat for you rather than for juniors around you.

Office politics waste time but water cooler conversation is an important part of operating in an agency. One learns through listening how to avoid politics and acts decisively when politics threaten his position. Another true story... When I first entered PR, I reported to two account managers, neither of whom liked the other. When one told me what to do, the other contradicted his orders. The situation was untenable: I was paralyzed and frustrated. Finally, I told the two managers to decide between them what I was to do and to let me do it. They did, and I was assigned full-time to one of them. Luck was on my side. I was put in charge of accounts under an executive who was on the road so much that I handled clients with little supervision. A woman across the hall was hired at the same time as I, and she was frustrated too. She worked in the marketing department. We would discuss what she might do but her time ran out, and she was fired. The situation was a lesson to listen closely, step up quickly and take charge. And, O yes, accept good fortune when it comes your way. (I learned later that the manager for whom I worked had been through several account executives. Why he kept me, I never did know.)

Unfortunately, many young practitioners aren't ready to seize their chances when they come. Some expect to manage accounts rather than work on them. Their ideas might be creative, but they can't implement. Worst of all, they don't take time to learn, really learn, a client's business. They meet with clients but they can't strategize with clients. They are too busy selling clients to hear what the clients have to say. Sadly, they often learn these bad habits from supervisors who are under pressure to sell new business.

Success in agency work comes from what one produces. It is a simple business but often difficult. If I were a junior today trying to enter PR, I would concentrate on my abilities to get things done. That apparently is what happened many years ago with the essay about bank loans. It wasn't the best-written essay, but it was good enough for the agency executive to conclude that the business could make money from my skills. I hope I proved him right.

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