

Training Young Agency Practitioners: Thoughts from afar

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When I started in agency PR, it was an entrepreneurial, mom-and-pop business of technical simplicity. We had typewriters and secretaries. There were no fax machines, word processors or PCs. Media lists were in fat green directories (that still exist somehow). Mailing lists were assembled by hand and inaccurate most of the time. We used a mailing house that stuffed envelopes and assembled press kits. Releases went out by the hundreds. Targeting? Who did that?

Today, the largest PR/communications firms are multinationals and they are doing much more than dialing the media for dollars. Furthermore, they are technically sophisticated. It is easy now to keep an electronic calendar, to send 30 highly targeted e-mails with press releases, to look up a phone number in a software rolodex, to research on the internet without traipsing to a library. PR practitioners need more skills today than at any time in the past because there are more tasks, more media and more tools. When I entered the business, the ability to write and contact the media was essential. Now, they are hardly enough. An agency PR practitioner, more than ever, is a jack-of-all-trades, a Swiss Army Knife. The practitioner may not be outstanding in every skill because few are, but he or she is able to get a job done.

In an earlier essay, I listed skills an agency practitioner needs. Here is that partial list slightly expanded: (See http://www.online-pr.com/Holding/Future_of_Media_Relations.PDF).

Cognitive Skills

- News writing.
- News judgment.
- Copy editing.
- Knowledge of traditional and new media.
- Knowledge of organizations that practitioners represent.
- Contacts within industries where they work.
- Familiarity with editors, reporters, writers, bloggers and experts working in traditional and new media.
- Media research and targeting in multiple media, including bloggers.
- Telephone and in-person presentation skills.
- Concept development skills.
- Ability to develop creative ideas to gain awareness.

- Familiarity with media measurement technologies.
- Ability to research information online.
- Task management skills and an ability to meet deadlines.
- Computer security.
- Blogging.
- Ability to sell.
- Understanding social media.
- Ability to persuade.

Technical skills

- Word processing.
- Spreadsheet.
- PowerPoint (Electronic) presentation.
- Image manipulation.
- Database.
- Web navigation.
- E-mail.
- Electronic calendar.
- Digital camera.
- Software downloading and installation.
- Videoconferencing.
- Storage devices to include CDs, flash memory cards and DVDs.
- Scanner.
- PDA.
- RSS.
- WiFi.
- Timekeeping software.

How much formal training should young PR practitioners have before entering the agency business and how much should devolve on the agency and On-The-Job training? Historically, agencies have done little training. Juniors are thrown into jobs and expected to perform. Agency PR pays people to do, not to learn. It

is up to agency juniors to find their ways and to keep clients and supervisors happy.

Keeping oneself busy and billable is essential. There is no reward for being unoccupied.

What agencies do

There are two main tasks in the agency business:

- **Sell.** The agency business belongs to those who develop business, be it from existing clients or new.
- **Execute.** The PR agency business comes down to doing what you promise to accomplish.

Execution has two elements, however, where practitioners often fail. The first is knowledge. Good practitioners learn their clients' businesses and the media that report on those businesses. Some practitioners are stronger in knowing the media and some in understanding clients, but either way, they grasp what is needed and make it happen. The second is persuasiveness. Practitioners must know how to sell ideas effectively to target audiences. This requires a practical understanding of the theory of persuasion. Young practitioners are expected to know communications theory and be ready to persuade when they start.

Persuasion

The basic theory of persuasion has changed little. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is as applicable today as it was more than 2300 years ago. Aristotle was talking about spoken communications and not e-mail, but he defined the objective of communications – persuading the listener. Or as he wrote,

“Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. This is not a function of any other art. Every other art can instruct or persuade about its own particular subject-matter; for instance, medicine about what is healthy and unhealthy, geometry about the properties of magnitudes, arithmetic about numbers, and the same is true of the other arts and sciences. But rhetoric we look upon as the power of observing the means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us; and that is why we say that, in its technical character, it is not concerned with any special or definite class of subjects.”

Like agency work, communications theory is practical. Principles mean little or nothing in the abstract. A primary task of communicators is understanding target audiences as a basis for employing the machinery of persuasion. Understanding

comes through studies other than rhetoric or communications. This is why many successful communicators have not come from university communications programs. They came from disciplines such as science, history, medicine and law that allowed them to understand the environment and audiences they were trying to reach. They learned communications techniques elsewhere, perhaps through ancillary study or through practical application.

Therefore, should communications be a major in college or a minor and adjunct to other courses? That is, should one study engineering and take communications courses as part of engineering study or study communications and dip into engineering as needed? Or, should we return to the Trivium, the classical model of education wherein one studied grammar, logic and rhetoric first then went on to deeper and broader studies?

Reality

Returning to the past is unlikely in modern colleges and universities. There are some that offer communications courses as an adjunct to other disciplines but, in my experience, the pairing has been uncomfortable.

Where teaching of communications techniques is subordinated, they are largely ignored in the educational bureaucracy. In business school, for example, communications professors were not taken as seriously as professors of finance. Communications techniques were considered a soft discipline – a nice to have but not mandatory study—whereas finance was essential. If one examines required business courses for Harvard Business School, there isn't a single unit devoted to communications and presentation. (See <http://www.hbs.edu/mba/academics/term1.html>) It is assumed students have acquired these skills.

It is understandable that communications professors should want their own departments, their own courses of study and career tracks. On the other hand, communications departments can become ghettos of technique – writing, presentation and theory divorced from other disciplines. Students major in communications but little else and many miss the all-important study of logic at the heart of persuasion. It is sad to see students who have studied press release writing but are unable to organize data into logical argument. They are lost when handed a topic outside of their experience and for most juniors who have been communications majors nearly all topics are outside of their experience. If university level courses were interdisciplinary, there would be an equality of understanding among disciplines. However, interdisciplinary study is true only for a few colleges and universities.

What to do

What should a practitioner-to-be do? The answer is to get a degree and experience in a discipline other than writing, a degree and experience that have value in the commercial world and educate oneself in communications skills one will need. This can be done through taking added courses in writing, rhetoric and presentation or through a personal practicum, such as reporting for a school newspaper. The most important factor on a resume is proof that you can and have executed. Write, present and build a body of work that shows what you can do and topics you have mastered. There is an opportunity here for educators to provide ancillary courses in communications to other disciplines, courses tailored to each discipline. Some universities do it already: More could.

For juniors within an agency environment, accept the challenge that learning is continuous. There is never a time one can say that he or she has learned everything there is to know. Take advantage of every opportunity an agency might provide. Learn the software. Get involved in multiple accounts. Be ready, eager and desirous of finding out more. When you have stopped learning, be ready to move. It is too easy to get caught in a rut in agency work, a groove that damages one's career later.

Agencies in turn should rotate juniors to broaden their experience quickly. They should assign a mentor to guide a junior's learning who provides consistent and frequent feedback to the junior. If a junior isn't working out, an agency should let the junior go sooner rather than later so he or she can pursue another career course.

There doesn't appear to be model approach for the training juniors in PR agencies because programs do not appear to be set up for them. Until 20 years ago there was a reason for that. Most PR agencies were small. Since then, agencies have consolidated and many are worldwide. There is room for better training now. The question is how many communications professors and agencies understand that?

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