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The lowdown on aiming for the top

Craig McGuire - 22 Mar 2004 00:00

Discovers how PR professionals can gain both the respect of C-level executives and a seat at the corporate table

Commanding the respect of seasoned executives is a challenging proposition for any PR professional. But in today's intense business climate, junior PR practitioners are at an even greater disadvantage, viewed by many ominous, omnipotent corporate titans as inexperienced, or simply insignificant.

While charisma and sheer luck can play pivotal roles, busting your way into the boardroom and getting the C-suite to take you seriously usually requires more than just the proper alignment of the corporate stars.

It is a mission that should consume your every waking moment as you hone your instincts, obsess on an impossibly sophisticated lexicon, and bury yourself beneath mountains of corporate documents. But, so say these PR pros, it can be done.

As health-communication specialist at the Missouri Patient Care Review Foundation - a major Jefferson City-based non-profit healthcare organization - Andrew Shea placed more than 300 stories in state and national media outlets in the past six months. In addition, he produces a quarterly 10,000-circulation physician magazine and writes not only all company news releases, but speeches, as well.

But what is striking about Shea is not that he is essentially the firm's senior spokesman, but that he is only 24. Shea, though, has accomplished this by leveraging his relatively young age, not in spite of it.

"I have no family, so I can work longer hours, and the longer you stay at the office, the more opportunities you have to interact with senior management," Shea says.

At the same time, Shea also has used his youthful appearance to attract a number of valuable mentor relationships.

"People in positions of trust frequently enjoy sharing what they have learned with those who genuinely want to know about it," he says. This technique also applies to PR agency cubs honing in on a career track pegged to a particular vertical.

Still, gushing flattery and gluing yourself to the water cooler can only get you so far. "I have found that the best way to overcome my age is to consistently overperform," Shea says. "If my supervisor asks me to place five stories in newspapers, I stay at the office until I've placed 10. If our CEO wants a 20-minute speech written, I write him two versions with a personal note explaining that I worked over the weekend to make sure his presentation

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would be the best it could be."

If you are in the communications department or part of an agency team, and are not lucky enough to be related to management, you will have to earn your seat at the corporate table the hard way.

"You have to be willing to not only conduct a lot of research, but put forth the effort to interpret your findings and deliver an analysis that provides critical insights that help the company's leaders understand the implications of certain decisions and policies," says Burson-Marsteller CEO Chris Komisarjevsky.

This analysis is key as the firm's business side will usually have an army of statisticians and computers arrayed that could dwarf any data you submit.

But what happens when the boardroom door keeps slamming in your face? As Allison Smith, senior account agent for Atlanta-based William Mills Agency, says, "Then it's time to get creative. Listen with your eyes, like a private investigator. Keep a tiny notepad and record your clues. If they have baseball memorabilia, model airplanes, Frank Lloyd Wright architectural books, multiple photos of a pet, take note. These are things you won't learn from a résumé."

And never underestimate the position and power of the CEO's receptionist/assistant. "The assistant may seem unimportant, but remember, he or she is the gatekeeper to all you need to know about your elusive CEO," Smith says. "If you take five to 10 minutes to sincerely focus on their day, weekend, hobbies, vacation, etc., you've made an instant alliance."

Whenever you send any documents or information to senior management, attach a handwritten note. "Anyone can clip an article from *The Wall Street Journal* and send it to the CEO," Smith says. "But when anyone receives a handwritten note or letter via snail mail, the day stops, brightens, and the recipient takes notice."

In terms of specific credentials, perhaps nothing carries more clout than an MBA. However, pursuing one requires a painful commitment of time and energy, not to mention saddling yourself with the daunting burden of smothering student loans.

"Early on in my career, I observed that PR practitioners did not always earn the respect of upper management," says Jennifer Prosek, partner at New York-based agency Cubitt Jacobs & Prosek. "From what I could surmise, it was largely because they did not speak the operational and financial language of the CFO and CEO."

So at the age of 27, Prosek entered Columbia University's Graduate School of Business. To get an idea of what it takes to achieve an MBA, a typical day for Prosek usually involved waking no later than 5am to study before work and then studying from at least 7pm to midnight every night for two years.

"If you intend to be the head of a global corporate PR department or head an agency one day, it is worthwhile," she reflects. "If you are not intending to work that hard and don't see yourself going that far, it is not."

C-level professionals usually have very strong, often overpowering personalities, and can be ruthless in mentally assassinating underlings in public. Therefore, projecting an image of self-confidence while demonstrating competence, especially in the face of adversity, is crucial for crashing the corporate party.

"In a collaborative work environment, you absolutely must demonstrate confidence, but also be open to criticism and alternate courses of action," says Colin McKay, who at 34 has risen to the position of manager in the communications and marketing branch in the Canadian government's Department of Industry. "Senior executives often rely upon their personal impressions of your work, which means prepare, work hard, and look for an opportunity to work directly with them."

Technique tips

- Do** seek out mentor-type relationships with senior executives
- Do** pursue an MBA degree, if you've got the stomach for it
- Do** study company data, produce analyses, and learn the corporate lingo
- Don't** offend the CEO's receptionist/assistant. You never know when you might need them
- Don't** submit inaccurate data or reports bearing your name
- Don't** interrupt: There is a fine line between being ambitious and obnoxious

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