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The road to PR

Craig McGuire - 25 Apr 2005 00:00

Among the industry's senior ranks, few began college with PR in mind.

During his time as president and CEO of GCI Group, Bob Feldman led 50 offices in 27 countries. Despite his success, though, Feldman, who was just named head of corporate communications at DreamWorks Animation SKG, didn't envision a career in PR.

"I was a political science major at Utica College in upstate New York on my way to law school," Feldman recalls, "until one day, while walking on campus, Professor Ray Simon pulled me to the side. He said, 'Bob, I think you should consider a career in PR.'"

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Over the next several years, Feldman gradually evolved his major from political science to political science journalism to finally PR. His journey, though, is not that different from that of many PR practitioners.

Speak to any senior PR professional, and chances are they, too, had very different aspirations entering college. In the realm of academia, PR is the equal opportunity subject that draws in so many from other majors because it can recycle such a wide range of skill sets.

But the jump from journalism into PR is probably the most common - though English gives it a run for its money. Just think of the many PR pros you know who were once poorly paid edit-desk jockeys.

Now a senior partner at Ketchum, Robert Flaherty was not only a college contemporary of Feldman (he entered Utica three years behind), but he also entered the school heading in a different direction. It was a time in the 1970s when hordes of idealistic youngsters headed to college envisioning themselves the next Woodward or Bernstein.

"When I applied to Utica, I was interested in advertising, but when I got there, it was post-Watergate, and journalism was very appealing," Flaherty says. He worked on two college newspapers, as well as had an internship at the NBC affiliate station in Utica.

"I rode on the camera truck to cover fires, crime scenes, elections, celebrities, for the local 11 o'clock news," Flaherty reminisces. "It was real work experience that taught me how to handle deadline pressure, which is not just for journalists, but is so much a part of a PR professional's everyday life."

Flaherty also served as news director for the college radio station, which had a difficult time staffing during the summer. "I ended up with three hours a morning, five day a week," Flaherty says. "Anyone who knows broadcast knows that is a lot of airtime to fill. But it was

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more great job experience that gave me a different perspective."

Despite this immersion in journalism, during his junior year, Flaherty began leaning toward PR and would eventually graduate with a dual degree in journalism and PR. "It was during a PR internship for Planned Parenthood of the Mohawk Valley that my excitement was really fueled," Flaherty says. "I worked on annual reports and dealt with the various audiences of a nonprofit, and found it was a great microcosm of what PR involves."

Perhaps nobody has a better take on the value of PR education than former Utica professor Ray Simon. Feldman and Flaherty are just two of the more than 1,000 students who have passed through the legendary professor's classroom since 1949, when he accepted a \$3,500-per-year position to teach PR courses.

"One of the things about Ray that I think he does better than any professor I have known is his ability to develop and nurture a network of former students," Feldman says.

In April, Simon was feted in New York for his 90th birthday, which was also a fundraiser for The Professor Raymond Simon Convergence Media Center planned for Utica.

When Simon started in 1949, the number of schools that offered PR programs could probably be counted on one hand. Today, undergraduate enrollment in PR programs at US four-year colleges and universities are conservatively estimated to be well in excess of 20,000 majors, according to the PRSA.

For Simon, by far the biggest change is the demographics of the student body.

"I recently went through one of my old grade books from 1951 and had an intro class with 30 young men, but only one woman," Simon recalls. "Isn't that something? Today, they have recruiters coming to the school looking for men because so few are entering the field."

Changing directions

For some, the winding road to PR can have a pretty wicked on-ramp. As an account supervisor at Padilla Speer Beardsley, Kelly Groehler originally had her heart set on a career in sports broadcasting when she entered St. Cloud State University in Minnesota.

But from her very first class, Groehler quickly realized journalism wasn't for her. She asks, "Do you know what it's like to see your dream disintegrate in front of you in a matter of minutes?"

After class, a crestfallen Groehler trudged to academic adviser Gretchen Tiberghien's office. "She asked me, 'Do you want to be one of 17 reporters outside the locker room asking the questions or do you want to be the one helping the head coach answer them,'" Groehler says. "What I know now of the sports industry, I am glad I went through that door she opened for me."

For Danielle Cohn, the epiphany came a bit earlier. Graduating early from high school, Cohn was not sure what major she wanted to pursue. So rather than heading directly into college, she took some time to think, working in a coffee shop outside Philadelphia that just happened to be near a PR agency. "This group would come in for breakfast or lunch and talk shop," she says. "They'd have their creative hats on and pitch back and forth. I was outgoing and very interested in the brainstorming. One of them commented that I should think about a career in PR. It was like a light bulb went off."

Later, while at Temple University, what Cohn remembers most is the red pen of Dr. Jean Brody. "She made me the writer I am, and I have found that writing is the root of all PR," Cohn says.

These days, Cohn is delighted in her position as VP/PR for the Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau. And she teaches an Introduction to PR course at Temple on weekends.

During his formative years, Aaron Hoffman, Sara Lee's executive director, IR, did a bit more than dabble. He earned his undergraduate degree in history from Indiana University in 1993 and entered University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on a PhD track.

"I took a particularly goofy path to IR," Hoffman says. "My mom was a professor, and I wanted to teach. Plus I liked the idea of having summers off."

Hoffman quickly became disillusioned by the mountain of research he would have to build before he could get anywhere near a classroom to teach.

"So one day, my mom said I should look into PR," Hoffman says. "I picked up a textbook on the subject, and it was the only text book I have ever read cover to cover."

Today, Hoffman is doing exactly what he set out to do. "Whether it is investors or analysts, my job requires me to teach people about Sara Lee," Hoffman says. "So not only have I found way back, I think it's safe to say I get paid much better than most teachers."

Expanding opportunities for students

From instructors like Simon to agency leaders like Feldman and Flaherty to up-and-comers Hoffman and Cohn, one theme of advice threads through them all.

"Regardless of what kind of PR you eventually do, don't be afraid of accounting, business strategy, and management," Hoffman says. "I strongly encourage students to go over to the business department and take classes. Be a real good business person because your ability to digest a P&L can lead to amazing opportunities."

As it is such ubiquitous advice PR programs across the US have expanded their curricula. "There has been a wave of new programs in PR and integrated marketing communications programs," says Clarke Caywood, associate professor, integrated marketing communications, the Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University. "Students will take sequences in investor relations, employee communications, media relations, and marketing PR. They will have had crisis management, basic strategy, and writing sequences where journalism professors really beat them up. It's pretty rigorous."

And perennial PR-education powerhouse Syracuse University now offers an innovative program for limited residency/distance learning that only requires its students to be on campus for six days per semester. "During the subsequent 14 weeks of the semester, they do work independently, engaging with professors and each other online," says Maria Russell, chair of the PR department.

Dubbed the MBA for PR by students, the course attracts pupils from all over the world. The curriculum encompasses one-third PR disciplines, one-third business management, and one-third leadership courses.

Still, while this specialization is producing more well-rounded PR rookies, the industry likely will always attract individuals that today are sitting in classrooms without an inkling of what tomorrow will bring.

Education breakdown

While the majority of the new professionals in the industry are now PR graduates, the people hiring them more often than not came through a more circuitous route.

To look at the kind of background that industry leaders have, PRWeek conducted an unscientific survey of 100 top-level agency management and corporate communications pros to find out where they got their undergraduate degrees and what they studied.

The top degree subject is predictable: English, and its variations, with 18 out of the 100. Tied in second place is journalism and political science, with 13% apiece. Only 9% cited a communications degree, 4% had a marketing degree, and a single PR graduate stands alone. By comparison, a poll conducted by the 2,300-member YoungPRPros Yahoo group, for communications pros in the first 10 years of their careers, 34% of the 175 people who answered majored in communications.

To prove how diverse the industry's senior ranks are, PRWeek's research shows that there are C-level agency and corporate folk with undergraduate degrees in pre-med, engineering, and physics (and a minor in zoology deserves mention), to say nothing of the seven economists, seven historians, four philosophers, and an artist.

As for where they studied, the research showed a remarkable spread of universities - more than 70 named among the sample. With three graduates apiece, George Washington, Utica, Columbia, and American University came out on top.

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