

Shaping Future Generations of Communications Professionals

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In March, I was invited to participate with communications professionals from gaming, healthcare, manufacturing, digital marketing and public relations in a workshop in Las Vegas sponsored by Lifeworks, Nevada's college and career readiness initiative, in cooperation with the Governor's Office of Workforce Innovation (OWINN) and the Nevada Department of Education.

The purpose of the workshop was to help ensure Nevada's educational institutions teach the skills and knowledge that matter to employers in the high-demand field of marketing, so that new-hires begin work with up-to-date skillsets companies actually need.

The experience was eye-opening for a number of reasons – not the least of which was to see that public relations was lumped into marketing communications, and not standing as its own unique category. As one of only two public relations pros in the room, I was happy to represent!

During the meeting, we were asked to identify trends in marketing communications and their necessary associated skillsets, identify emerging careers and pathways, evaluate existing educational standards and recommend big-picture concepts employers seek.

Generational thinking

We were seated in groups at two separate tables. Without purpose or intention, one group ended up being older Gen-Xers and some Baby Boomers and the other group were primarily young Gen-X and millennials.

It was fascinating. The older cohort listed mostly technical skills – digitally savvy, software proficiency, ability to write, be able to read and analyze data and knowledge of social media platforms and digital marketing. The millennial group listed primarily soft skills – ability to lead, meet deadlines, show up on time, take responsibility, understand your position/role as a junior staffer, and, just be nice.

Generationally, the Gen-X/Boomers looked for hard, technical abilities. The millennial group sought engagement, compatibility and leadership. From a sum total standpoint, all of us were looking for students to graduate fully equipped to be knowledgeable, experienced and, well, nice.

What does this mean for us as employers?

Three big ideas surrounding the future of marketing education and what employers in Nevada need emerged:

Big Idea #1: Understanding marketing organizational structure, corporate integration and impact

- Project execution
- Presentation/persuasion
- Budgeting and reporting
- Customer relationship
- Management and leadership (training vs. innate ability)
- Business writing

- Media/communications
- Product knowledge (company specific, sense of curiosity)
- Internal audiences

Big Idea #2: Understanding marketing technology

- Data analysis
- Coding
- Tech integrations
- Project management
- Remote and collaboration tools
- Microsoft Office Suite proficiency
- Reporting – ability to communicate what the data says

Big Idea #3: Understanding the customer journey and client engagement

- Storytelling
- Content lifecycle
- Audience segmentation
- Legal and ethics
- Communication – ability/skill
- Cultural sensitivity
- Persuasion/sales/presentation
- Data analysis
- Product knowledge (audience relationship)

What does this mean for us as public relations mentors?

Our students are facing a very high bar set by their future employers. As mentors, we have tough jobs cut out for us.

Many of the executives at the workshop work in large enterprises where data – the ability to gather, analyze and report data - is king. Where public relations expertise comes in is how to tell the story – humanize the product/service/company and relate it back to the target audience or public.

Students therefore need to have some practical experience with how business actually works. We know they are steeped in theory and get some practice with researching and writing strategic plans, but how many of them actually get to implement, execute and evaluate?

As mentors, we owe it to our interns/students/mentees to coach them with soft skills like email etiquette, how to make a portfolio and to expect to start near the bottom rung of the company ladder. We also owe it to them to provide actual hands-on project implementation, execution and evaluation. How else are they to gain that practical experience employers with high expectations are seeking?

Our local Sierra Nevada chapter has a robust relationship with our student chapter and we can help to shape the future of public relations, as well as continue our mission to elevate the profession, by providing meaningful student experiences as mentors. Our future professionals are depending on us.