

Skill Clinic

CSU Professor Offers Pointers to Students

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Editor's Note: Kirk Hallahan is an assistant professor in the School of Communication at Colorado State University. Hallahan is a former member of PRSSA and offers the following tips to up-and-coming professionals.

PR is principally a journalistic endeavor. Successful professionals possess superb reporting and research, writing and editing, and production skills. To be successful today, you must become an avid consumer of news, and be aware of what is happening in your field.

PR is hard work. While the job can appear glamorous, the visceral excitement can fade. You should be in PR because you like the work, and like to work.

PR always involves some type of client relationship. You might find yourself in an agency with outside, paying clients. You might also report to someone within your organization. Recognize that clients are people — their understanding, interest and appreciation for public relations can vary greatly.

PR results must be measured. Spell out your objectives, and obtain

agreement in advance with clients about how your efforts are to be evaluated. While exposure is the goal of many programs, there are instances where limited or no communication might be the best course of action. Do not confuse publicity with effective PR.

PR people do not have a corner on wisdom. PR people do not have all the answers. Managers look to PR professionals for guidance in their areas of expertise—communications, public and community opinion, and media relations. A practitioner's key responsibility is to know and to articulate affirmatively and persuasively the PR risks and opportunities to a client. Ultimately, it is the client who must make critical decisions.

PR practitioners must be great taskmasters of time. PR is a labor-intensive activity as compared to advertising, which is capital-intensive. For most

organizations, the primary PR expenditures are for the labor hours that go into a project. While your talent is what you have to offer, talent is often measured in terms of time.

PR people must possess good organizational skills. PR



Kirk Hallahan

people must possess the skills of setting priorities, planning, managing time, budgeting, and controlling torrents of paper and telephone calls. Prudent business practice

requires obtaining written approvals on materials, and maintaining orderly records of authorizations, expenditures and accomplishments.

Public relations involves creative problem solving. Problem solving is a skill that is honed, not inherited. Many creative solutions are variations on themes or techniques that have been used before. Thus, it is valuable to study a wide range

of PR programs conducted by others. Tap peers to gain insights about their experiences, to sound out your ideas, to develop cooperative programs, to obtain referrals, or simply to marshal moral support. Join at least one professional organization, such as PRSA, and subscribe to at least one professional publication.

First-time PR job seekers: Your top concern should be finding a mentor, a first supervisor who will support your continuing education. You will learn more in the first six months on the job than you did in college. A first boss can be critical to your success by serving as a role model, and providing the opportunities, challenges and other support you need to develop professionally. Initial salary concerns should be secondary in choosing between employers. Instead, focus on the opportunities for advancement and your earnings potential four to six years after employment.

Your professional reputation can precede you. Always act accordingly and burn no bridges behind you. Former employers, clients, peers and media contacts can, and will, turn up in unexpected ways in the future.