

Hiring Young Talent for Corporate Communications

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Many juniors have worked with me in corporate communications, and I have often wondered how to assess who would succeed and who fail before hiring them. It would save everyone time knowing that. Juniors would know to stay out of a career for which they are not suited, and PR agencies would not hire then fire someone who isn't effective.

But, there is no answer. One must work with someone for six months and observe how he or she performs. Examining stacks of resumes and asking hours of questions of job candidates are fruitless. It is better to tell applicants what is expected. If they are interested, they go into a pool of potential choices from which one is picked. It is not scientific, but the skills that make a good corporate relations practitioner are hardly scientific either.

A few examples make the point:

- Years ago, two of us shared a new young secretary. The first week on the job she could do nothing right. My colleague came to me and said we should get rid of her at once. Fortunately, we didn't. At the end of the first week, she caught on and swiftly rose to be our best account administrator. She was so good we offered her a job as an account executive. To our amazement, she turned us down. She didn't like PR, she said. So,

we let her find another job to her liking and regretfully let her go. I still think that she would have made a good corporate communicator.

- Another time, we had a young woman and her boyfriend working for us. They were Harvard graduates from well-to-do families. The young woman proved an adequate account executive. Her boyfriend was clueless, and we let him go eventually. I grew cynical about an Ivy League education as a result of this disaster.
- A third time, a young man showed up in New York from Texas looking for a job. He seemed OK, but he had graduated from a small college and worked for a while in a small Texas advertising agency. Nothing on his resume stood out. We hired him anyway. He became one of the best young executives I have ever had the pleasure of working with.

All three of these people looked about the same during interviews. They were not equal in outcome. The lesson is that one cannot easily select effective young practitioners on the basis of job interviews. It is difficult enough with mature practitioners. A veteran I once worked with and trusted turned out to be a drunk. Another man, disliked by his boss, turned out to be the best practitioner I had worked with until that time. A third fel-

low whom I knew as a conservative family man fell into scandalous behavior shortly after I had left a PR agency.

With mature practitioners, one can find colleagues with whom they have worked to learn about them. With young practitioners there is no way of knowing, even with letters of recommendation, whether they have what it takes to succeed in corporate communications.

There are reasons why it is – and will always be – difficult to know. To begin, ambition is not enough in corporate communications. It might be OK for marketing PR where one has less complex tasks such as placing product information in trade journals. In corporate communications, one's understanding of business must be higher. Implementers, who do what they are told and no more, do not succeed in corporate communications where one frequently has to develop the story to deliver.

Creativity also is not enough. Marketing PR practitioners are immensely valuable to help spark new approaches to gaining product and brand awareness, but their ideas may be insufficient for complex topics involving opinions of Wall Street analysts, nervous investors, lifted eyebrows of regulators, impatient national-level reporters and clients who expect an account executive to counsel them about communications needs.

Nor are planning and strategy enough. Some juniors in PR style themselves as planners rather than implementers. They see themselves as McKinsey-

like consultants and not publicists. But that rarely works in corporate communications. If one writes the plan, one more than likely implements the plan unless one is working in the few corporate or agency environments with the luxury to hand off responsibility. Further, the reason why consulting alone does not work well is that without implementation experience one cannot tell good plans from bad. Implementers know what works and what doesn't, and implementers who plan produce more pointed and practical programs.

Lastly, writing is not enough. One can write well but not understand the topic. This error is common. Long ago a writing teacher said writers should collect seven times more information than they need before crafting words because it is only then one can write authoritatively. Time and again, juniors take what they are told without questioning. They never think to check for accuracy or to understand what information means, and if you ask them why not, they are likely to tell you they don't have time. Or, they will say this is what the client wants. Or, they just don't think it important to understand the topic well, as long as they write with flair. As a result, errors creep into their work and they are oblivious to them, although clients and media are not.

Writing with accuracy and authority is fundamental to corporate communications. There are too many unsubstantiated claims that generate ill will and damage credibility. Corporate communications practitioners should stay well within facts. Journalists, especially sophisticated journalists in na-

tional media, are cynical. They assume PR people either lie or don't know what they are talking about. One must build credibility with them.

Accuracy demands continuous self-education, and here too PR juniors often fail in corporate communications. They don't understand the need to read widely and deeply into the companies they serve and the media they deal with. The best lesson I ever got about corporate communications came from a boss who said with a chuckle, "This is the best business there is. People pay you to learn their businesses." He was and is right.

A large part of the corporate communicator's job is to know what is going on and to connect client's issues, ideas, products and services to the news flow. This is why scanning newspapers, magazines, Web sites, TV news shows and journals is and will be important, even though one often cannot charge clients for time spent. It is not until one reads seven newspapers a day that he or she learns how stories change based on the reporter, the medium and editorial point of view. It is not until one digs into a client's esoteric product and financial documents that one discovers story ideas that link surprisingly well to the news and that no one saw before now.

Corporate communications practitioners translate ideas between the inside and outside of a company. Translation requires an intimate understanding of business and the medium into which one is moving an idea. This requires more than techni-

cal skills. It starts with understanding and moves to presentation.

When I look at young persons eager for a job and nervous about how they are presenting themselves, I have no way of knowing whether they will ever rise to a level were they continuously self-educate themselves and become savvy planners and implementers.

One always takes a chance and the surprise can be delightful or disappointing. For example, one young woman came to us with an attitude about personal appearance and dress. She would dress as she liked. This wasn't bad until she appeared before clients in jeans and old sweaters. I was ordered to talk to her about her appearance -- and I did. She never changed for me. In fact, she did not change her mind until long after she left our employment and went to another agency where she blossomed into a first-rate researcher. Eventually, she understood after working closely with clients that she had to do something. One day she called me and asked me to meet her in her office at the other agency. I did and was met by a sharply dressed young woman whom I almost did not recognize. She eventually left the business but she was effective while in it.

So if interviews and resumes don't work in detecting who is going to be a good corporate communicator, what does work?

One boss taught me a rule of thumb that I still use. Pick a junior then watch. You learn whether to keep or dismiss the person based on how many ask to work with him or her. If

every manager wants X on his or her account, then X is valuable. If no one wants to work with Y, then Y should be terminated. As far as I am concerned this is still the best way to approach hiring and retention of juniors. In fact, it is probably best for mature professionals as well.

Corporate communications works best with generalists who range from topic to topic easily and pitch in as needed. Juniors enter corporate communications with a natural handicap of inexperience. What their superiors look for is the ability to learn quickly and to get jobs done correctly with a minimum of hand holding. It is incumbent on superiors, by the way, to teach. Juniors have legitimate grievances when they are not told what to do, then held to impossibly high standards.

Almost all juniors with whom I have worked bump into limits after a time on the job. Their lack of knowledge about the industries and media they serve slow them and in most cases, stop development. It is then I watch for how they handle the barrier. A corporate communicator with long-term career potential will find a way around the limitations and continue to prove valuable. Someone with limited potential will accept the limitations and stop trying to improve. At that point, one can judge accurately how a junior will turn out. But, as I wrote at the beginning, it takes six months.

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