Educational experiences

University of Maryland’s Elizabeth Toth addresses master’s programs for working pros; Jeffrey Sharlach, adjunct professor at NYU, advises businesspeople to study comms

PR pros have many options to advance their knowledge and skills after they’ve begun their careers. More specifically, several professional PR master’s degree programs are available to them.

Such programs range from academic studies of strategic communication; master’s programs with a management focus; programs that integrate PR, advertising, and marketing (IMC); and interdisciplinary studies of communication, business, and public policy.

Some PR master’s programs use academic faculty, some employ PR pros as instructors, while others offer a combination of the two. Master’s programs could be taught in traditional classrooms, strictly online, or as a hybrid of the two. Professional master’s degrees may take one or two years to complete, depending on whether they are full-time residency programs. PR pros can choose graduate programs that allow them to continue to work full time. Professional master’s programs have already adapted to the working PR pro by offering classes in the evenings and on weekends, typically over a two-year period.

Clear objectives
PR pros benefit most from a master’s program when they have clear career goals. If they want to lead a PR department or agency, they will need management skills and knowledge not offered on the undergrad level. Three to five years of experience is recommended in order to see what advanced career opportunities are of interest and what credentials will be required.

PR practitioners with 10-plus years of experience can also benefit from continuing their education because of how rapidly the field is changing. Senior pros, for example, might consider a master’s degree to qualify to teach at the university level.

Some employers provide tuition for their PR pros to obtain advanced education. If this benefit is not available to staffers, employers have supported release time to obtain advanced degrees. Although scholarships and financial aid are not as readily available for professional graduate studies as they are for the undergraduate level, it is worth investigating when choosing a master’s program.

Selecting the right program to achieve the right outcome takes research and planning. However, for established PR pros, much like undergraduates, an advanced degree will always be of value.

Elizabeth Toth is professor and chair of the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland.

PR: Good for Business
The biggest challenge in the PR business is finding talent. Traditionally, the sector has sought those with journalism and communications skills. Get people who can write and they’ll learn about business.

At my first agency job at Carl Byoir & Associates, I hadn’t come from a wire service or newspaper. I had an undergraduate journalism degree, but Carl Byoir was my first full-time job, right after I graduated from NYU Law School and passed the bar exam in 1977.

Since then, I’ve spent my entire career at PR agencies: Burson-Marsteller, Rowland Worldwide, and Carl Byoir, before starting my own firm, The Jeffrey Group, in 1993. I’ve spent a lot of time working with client companies.

One of the biggest barriers to successful PR programs is how little understanding many people in business have about what we do. I’ve always had that unique perspective of being an attorney in the PR business. That’s come in very handy, especially in sensitive situations where lawyers are determined to ensure as little is said as possible. Being able to question lawyers, rather than just nod OK, has helped me and my clients.

How great would it be if businesspeople truly understood communications? Instead of PR pros learning about business, what if people in business learned about PR? Answering that question was how I first came across the Management Communication Program at NYU’s Stern School of Business, where I’ve been an adjunct professor since 2007.

Each year, it introduces more than a thousand business undergrads and MBAs to the full range of corporate communications – from media relations to CSR.

Only a handful of these students will likely end up in PR. However, as I note at the last class of each semester, I hope these future Fortune 500 CEOs remember one thing: if the finance people want to cut the PR budget, I trust they’ve at least learned enough to stand firm and say, “No way!”

Jeffrey Sharlach, chairman and CEO of The Jeffrey Group, is an adjunct associate professor of management communication at the Stern School of Business at NYU.