

PRWEEK

June 2, 2008

The Agency Business - MBAs help PR pros to stand out with C-suite execs

By Aarti Shah

When the economy stumbles, PR is typically one of the first places that skittish companies make cuts. But as PR agencies work to gain the confidence of C-suite executives, those PR pros with MBAs are better positioned to make a compelling case for preserving the marketing budget during lean times. Even though only 4.4% of respondents to PRWeek's 2008 Salary Survey held MBAs, PR pros are increasingly leveraging MBAs to gain clout inside the C-suite.

PR has traditionally aligned with 'soft skills' like writing and media relations. Lori Teranishi, CEO of Van Prooyen Greenfield (VPG), who holds an MBA, says that even if a PR pro doesn't regularly use the analytical and financial skills learned in business school, the degree instills a certain confidence among executives.

'The C-suite expects PR pros to be able to advise on strategy from a business perspective,' she adds. 'If you can't operate on that level, you don't receive the same attention as the management consultants.'

As measurement becomes a core component to PR campaigns and to the way clients evaluate agencies, quantitative skills have become more important. Lisa Novak, SVP at Ruder Finn West, wanted to strengthen her business acumen and recently earned an MBA by attending evening courses. She says the most valuable skills she gained from the endeavor was the ability to demonstrate to a CEO how a campaign will affect the bottom line and measure the ROI for PR programs.

'When I am working on a new piece of business or talking to an existing client, I feel really comfortable talking about the challenges, because I understand the (bigger) picture,' she adds.

Even though all practice areas value an MBA, it is even more appreciated if the PR pro is directly advising C-level executives. PR pros working in the corporate or IR areas, handling legality issues, or working with companies in the financial services industry deal with matters that are sometimes more pressing to senior executives.

Geoff Mordock, VP at Fleishman-Hillard, says that since obtaining his MBA, his counsel

to clients has become more strategic.

'I believe that it's a more holistic approach,' he notes. 'I'm also more integrated with different parts of the business on behalf of my clients. For instance, I'll interface with the CFO and general counsel more often than marketing.'

Because many firms don't actively seek out MBA candidates, determining the level of demand for advanced degrees is unclear.

Lisa Fuhrman, an executive recruiter at Ketchum, says the agency does not actively recruit MBA candidates, but she has seen a rise in the number of MBAs (and other master's degrees) in the applicant pool.

But Kirsten Osolind, CEO of Re:Invention Marketing, says she gives preference to candidates with MBAs because of the analytical tools learned and networking connections from MBA programs.

'I have a preference for candidates with MBAs, but not a restriction,' she adds.

KEY POINTS:

- PR pros with an MBA can gain more access to C-level executives
- MBA programs teach quantitative skills helpful for PR metrics and ROI
- PR pros with MBAs can develop more holistic efforts that take into account the full business operation.