

Lessons from a PR student, turned PR practitioner

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Change is scary, every human knows that. But for me, the most frightening experience was the transition from "student to employee". Gone were the six-hour days (maximum of six hours out of exam seasons), and hello to the "9am - 5pm" environment.



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What made this experience an even greater challenge, was that in my third and final year of university, as with most public relations (PR) students, I had to find an internship. All I remember thinking was "who on earth would hire me? I have no experience in the PR industry... Being a legal clerk, and a primary school receptionist won't come in handy".

To my delight and surprise, the very first interview I went for at Printacom/OKI South Africa was my first, and last. Then the next challenge crept in, I lived 90kms from my job, but I would not let that derail my path to success. My first day on the job happened to be on 3 February 2014, I wore an olive green blouse with a pair of black slacks, paired with olive green pumps (matching was in back then). However, consider that I lived 90kms away from work, and it was pouring on that day, and I happened to be taking a bus to work. Needless to say, I was an hour late on my first day, and with no umbrella, I walked in there as if I had just completed 10 laps at the nearest swimming pool.

So now, I had to march up to my boss and apologise in person for being late, with water dripping from everywhere, and all he said was "it's okay!" (with no smile). After having met the OKI SA team, my desk and I bonded, as I awaited tasks. Being so fearful of saying something stupid, I just sat there and waited... until I was assigned with my first task which happened to be writing test. At the risk of sounding somewhat narcissistic, I'm generally a very good writer. But on that day, I lost my composure, and doubted myself like never before. See previously, I knew the reading and writing preferences of all my lecturers. Now, here's this new guy, who just so happens to be my new boss - what are his preferences?

Nevertheless, I wrote an amazing, (this is my opinion), piece on the one of the OKI products. By this time, the lunch hour had come and gone, and my nerves had me in a twist, so I had even forgotten to eat my lunch because he had still not commented on my writing, and the end of the day rolled in, just as spring usually sets in after winter. And still, no word from him.

My journey home that day was interesting to say the least. I had a detailed conversation with myself in the bus. I said "Self, tomorrow morning, you'll walk in, greet everyone by name, and own your day!" I had this conversation with myself every day for three weeks, in the hope that somewhere along the line I would start believing it. For me, in all honesty, this was not an easy transition! There was a day I missed a deadline and felt so disappointed, because before this day, never in my life had I ever missed a deadline. But there was a lesson in it! Time management.

Three weeks into my new position as the "public relations and marketing assist" I was due for a performance review. I cannot tell you how nervous I was. I had to have completed one PR plan/campaign (right from the conception of this plan, to the post analysis), a dozen blog pieces, a social media strategy, as well as press releases on some of the products. However, I walked into that review with four PR plan/campaigns, 19 blog pieces, two angles for the social media strategy, and 12 press releases, because remember in my mind I was the new kid, and I had to impress my boss. My boss was floored, and at that moment, I realised he was human.



As a student, what most employees fail to understand is that the greater majority of us actually have no idea what this public

relations thing entails. What you, as a student are taught in university and the practical application of the profession are day and night. This, in all honesty, made me doubt what I had been doing. But on that Friday (22 February 2014), my faith in my profession had been restored like never before. Just seeing the faith that my boss had in me, that allowed my self-confidence to soar again.

Allow me to fast forward to the June of that year (when my contract had been due to expire), my boss had sent me an email, two weeks before what was supposed to be my last day saying:

*"Hi Jodene,
So, I know that you are due to complete your internship with us at the end of the month.
I was thinking, if you would like to, you could stay on till November, because our team would not be the same without you. Let me know if you're interested so that we can renew your contract."
Regards."*

I remember thinking "If I would like to?" Of course I would like to, and that same day, my contract was renewed. Never in my life have I felt as proud of myself as I did at that very moment. This meant that I was learning, and more importantly I was growing as a public relations practitioner (PRP).

There are however a few things I would change. People who really know me, know me as the talkative loud mouth. OK! SA however, knew me as the reserved, introverted little big girl. I would have stood up to voice my thoughts and opinions from day one. I would have been the chick who presented her own ideas verbally, instead of via email. I would have been the chick who stood for what I believed in, instead of succumbing due to the fear of being the new girl "fresh from school". I would have been true to me from day one. My reason for this is simple, because even now, two years later, I find myself still shying away from situations I know I can own holistically, because of the fear I brought upon myself back then!

I would have read, read & read more on the various roles and dynamics of PR and how they all tie together. I would have gone out during my holidays and found a PR job to get a head start, irrespective of whether or not they paid me. I would have figured it out. I would have shone before I knew I was a star... Do not allow your learning process to stop after lectures. Read various publications: online newspapers, consumer magazines, newspapers, read books. This will help you determine which content goes to which media, and the writing tone to use for the various media.

Visit radio stations, (obviously make arrangements, do not tell them "oh but Jodene said I should). Visit the SABC or ANN7 or eNCA. Read at least five newspapers a week, with two magazines a week. Read the articles on Bizcommunity. Put yourself out there. Always remember that in your industry your social media platforms are a reflection of the life you live, so be very careful what you share! Always remember, that even after hours, you still represent your organisation, as well as the clients you service. Do not be afraid to own brainstorm, do not hold back - no idea is stupid. Lastly, if you are quiet in a meeting, you might as well not even be there... So be there. Be bold. Do you to the best of your abilities!

So dear first, second and third year PR student, this is for you. Shine brighter than Rihanna's diamond. Find you, and do you!!

Yours faithfully,

Public relations student turned public relation practitioner