

# Making the right moves: Ron Culp on blogs, mentoring and your MBA

Ron Culp, a partner and managing director at Ketchum in Chicago, is a passionate PR practitioner who has experienced the profession from every angle. He started his career in political public relations and has since held several prestigious positions in corporate public relations, including senior vice president of public relations and government affairs at Sears. He shares these experiences on his blog, *Culpwrit.com* — founded last summer to offer career advice and guidance for young people looking to begin their own PR career.

Here, Culp speaks with Kyra Auffermann, assistant editor of *Tactics*, about mentoring, searching for jobs in a lagging economy and the importance of networking before it's too late.

## What led you to start Culpwrit?

I always thought I wanted to be a teacher, and the blog allowed me to start out in a safe environment while still being employed full-time. It's here and now: Someone asks me a question today, and I answer it today. I've been amazed with how it's taken off. Generally I'm looking at college-age readers through about age 25, and nothing like it existed [in the blogosphere]. It's personally very rewarding to get the kind of message I get back from young people.

## What's one of the most common career mistakes that you see?

Especially for people already in their careers, the mistake that they make is that they fail to network until they're unemployed.

## How can someone take those initial steps to network if they haven't already done so?

Everyone thinks you have to start with somebody in public relations for [networking], but you don't. The network ought to start with your neighbors, your friends, your family.

You ought to be networking everywhere when you're looking for a job; look at every opportunity . . . because invariably, somebody is going to know somebody who is going to be able to help you. Don't limit your networking to only people within public relations.

## How should people change their approach to job hunting in a slow economy?

Accelerate everything you do normally. I think everyone does the reading and research, but you need to think

about what's going on in the media. You've got to have a point of view about campaigns that the company is doing, and show true knowledge and interest in the organization's business model and how they make a profit. Ask informed questions. It's amazing how many times I'll hear a basic question about what Ketchum does, and they haven't spent the time to really research.

Looking for a job is a full-time job, and [candidates] absolutely need to make it such. Don't just wait for responses from the few résumés you've sent out.

I remember when I was looking for a job at one point, and I was meeting with a friend who was also seeking a job. She said she was sending out an average of 70 résumés a day. She ended up having five job offers. They're out there, but you've just got to work it constantly.

## If someone has been laid off, how can he or she best take advantage of this time?

Take a class, get more involved in social media, speak at local high schools or colleges about careers in public relations, be helpful, stay involved. Being involved also helps you remain enthusiastic about your profession. The [practitioners] who are really throwing themselves into it are going to succeed. It goes back to passion, and if you're passionate in this profession then you're going to succeed.

## What skills should practitioners develop to make themselves more marketable in a slower economy?

The ability to understand business, business operations and technology overrides everything else in this profession today. [Valuable employees] demonstrate the acumen for how businesses make their money, or how an agency makes its money and how you can contribute to that process. So what you have to really bring is a deep understanding of both business and technology.

## You've undergone several major career switches. What should practitioners consider before making that kind of change, especially later in their careers?

I subscribe to the "seven-year-itch" theory: If you're at your job for seven years and it isn't changing, then you need to change it. And then seven



## Getting to know . . . Ron Culp

### Best leadership advice

"Maintain or develop a sense of humor — more important now than ever."

### Three dinner guests, past or present

"Stephen Colbert, Tina Fey and George Will."

### Favorite TV show

"'Friday Night Lights' is brilliantly written and acted with powerful, moving relationships, especially between Coach Taylor and his wife. Together, they subtly provide weekly lessons in leadership."

years — as you get older — becomes more like two or three. The key is to make sure that you're constantly reinventing the job that you're doing. For instance, when I was at Sears, each year or two different things were added to my plate; I had new challenges constantly. So the reason I stayed there for 10 years was because I felt the job was interesting and wasn't just routine.

## Looking back on your career, is there anything you would have done differently?

I would've pursued an MBA earlier in my corporate career. I had to learn by asking stupid questions. I want to encourage people, if they are sincerely interested in working in any corporate business environment, that a business degree is going to help them tremendously.

## How can senior-level executives use their experience to help younger generations?

I don't have enough time in the day to spend the quality time I would like to with young people. So the blog allows me to reach a larger group of people. And, unfortunately, there are a lot more people seeking that advice than there are giving it. It's basically about being receptive.

[I would encourage] professionals who are mid-career and beyond, if they happen to be laid off in this economy, that [it is] a great time to help young practitioners. They should volunteer to speak at universities, to meet with students or to become a faculty adviser for PRSSA.

Whenever I go to a university setting, I feel good after that experience because I learned as much as they probably learned talking to me.

## On the flip side, how can new PR professionals reach out to obtain the guidance that they need?

When I look at my many mentors over my years, half of them had nothing to do with public relations. I went to people — faculty members, relatives, friends of the family — who genuinely cared about my success, and I would talk through career questions with them.

If you're unemployed and looking for a job as a young person, I'd look for people who are closer to your age who have jobs. Also, I'd tap into the university resources. I've always talked to anyone from Indiana State University, my alma mater, who has called me.

## How can practitioners convince their organizations about the value of public relations?

It's all about return on investment — both real and perceived. They want quantitative data to validate the investment in public relations, and others simply say, "I expected a really bad story, and that story is OK."

Determine what that employer is going to expect from public relations. If you know you're putting together a PR campaign that's launching a new product, but the thing the CEO cares about most is innovation, then your program ought to reflect [that].

## How has your involvement in PRSA helped you develop as a practitioner?

I've been involved for probably 40 years. I still go back to the first PRSA Chapter I belonged to, I still know people and stay in touch. It really provides a network, especially in smaller U.S. cities. I think it really does work as a place to build a network and friends. **T**