

Ellen Schmendinghoff
Public Relations Director for Blue Ion in Charleston, SC
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JC: Thanks for speaking with me.

ES: Of course.

JC: What company do you work for?

ES: Blue Ion, and I'm the public relations director here.

JC: Is this your first job?

ES: It's not.

JC: Could you give a brief history?

ES: Yeah absolutely. So when I was in college I was actually interested in event planning. So I did a couple of internships in event planning and I graduated in 2009 when the recession took a dive. So I was offered a job at the nonprofit that I did an event for. So that's where I started out. And I did--That's when I started working communication basically. But I did a lot of writing program development for something we were doing at the nonprofit and then I moved on through the years to work in-house in marketing and PR. Prior to working at Blue Line I was working for a hospitality PR company. And then these guys approached me to help them start their first PR department too. So that's my tenure.

JC: If you can say, what was the nonprofit?

ES: Darkness to Light.

JC: So what are the primary responsibilities of this position in this position.

ES: I was charged with, again, starting our PR department. So first it started with defining what PR public relations means to us here and how we'll do things differently. So we're constantly trying to think of that and evolve our services. My role also involves new business development to bringing in clients. And from an actual work perspective, when we get clients, it's a lot of writing. Helping them communicate their stories ultimately in all different mediums.

JC: What would you generally define PR as?

ES: Third party endorsements. I think that's the most simplistic way to put it. We're working to get other people talking about the clients. And hopefully what they're doing is so cool and compelling that it comes naturally. But sometimes they need a little extra nudge.

JC: Could you point to like A commonplace example of PR joy in the world—out in the wild?

ES: Yes. I would say for anyone who might watch a morning news show like The Today Show for instance. When they do segments on let's say a gift guide since it's the holidays we're talking right now. When they do segments about gift guides and different gift ideas the products that you see in those clips are typically placed by a publicist or a PR person. So behind the scenes they're working to get opportunities like that for their clients all the time. And something like a morning show is probably one of the biggest wins you can get because there's a ton of eyes watching that show. So that's kind of a way that you see it transform in everyday life. And you might not realize it.

JC: Could put it in social media terms, maybe?

ES: Yes.

JC: So PR would be the equivalent of trying to write a tweet so that it's then shared by someone else.

ES: Right.

JC: But it's kind of a much bigger scale--

ES: Well it doesn't even have to be on that big scale. That's just kind of one of the most common examples that you might not even realize there's so much work that goes behind what you see and something that might be there for like 30 seconds. But as far as social media is concerned, you know. Like if you work with influencers or people who have large followings on social to get their client placed on those platforms. So that happens all the time as well.

JC: So you contract with—

ES: Yeah or you just--it's more just pitching them. You know I could be anybody but just sharing a really cool idea that's hopefully well-written and thoughtful that someone wants to share.

JC: So specifically at Blue Ion, what is PR?

ES: We just try to think of it as storytelling. It's what we do. And any--any job you have here it's all about storytelling. So it's really helping people uncover those gems of stories that they have or that they're working on and might not be aware of it. So we are trying to bring energy

out of people versus like [us] saying [the client is] this or [they] do this or [to tell them to] say this. We're helping them uncover that [story] themselves.

JC: Is that like--Is that definition of your kind of conscious effort to create a brand at Blue Ion? Is it like a brand identity thing? Or like a corporate value thing?

ES: Yeah, yeah. Storytelling, yeah, certainly.

JC: What would you say are the primary duties--the primary responsibilities of this job.

ES: Let's see. I think from a business perspective [we're] making sure that we have the clients we need to keep three people doing PR company here. But outside of that it's really just kind of saying creative and understanding what's going on in our clients worlds. So we're able to take the things we hear in conversations with them and turn that into some type of marketing execution program. So it's helping them think a little bit outside of their day to day. Because they can be so bogged down by things they may not realize something super cool or unique that they're doing. So. It's all about listening to those things and identifying them and helping them share them. Ultimately.

JC: What of those duties or responsibilities involve writing specifically?

ES: Everything. You have to be a really strong writer to be able to do the job. Well. But I write all day every day. And it's not sometimes I'm writing copy and things that are a little more creative when project briefs, recaps. And again it's all about selling--selling what you're doing. And making sure the plan understands the value of that. So you have to be a really strong writer to do that.

JC: Could we drill down on each those?

ES: Yes.

JC: So what is copy?

ES: What I would consider [copy] is anything you might see on a web site or in a brochure or introduction in a magazine. So it's just the written language you're seeing all day every day.

JC: Would you include visuals or video or audio as part of copy?

ES: I wouldn't. I just consider that creative or creative assets. And copy usually always accompanies those things. So it's not necessarily what you're reading but copy that's written could be a voiceover in a video or something else that we create. So [copy] makes its way into all those things.

JC: So your end at least here would be kind of the script—

ES: Yeah exactly.

JC: And then you mentioned her report I forgot the title of--like a project brief?

ES: Yeah.

JC: So what is that exactly?

ES: Let's say it's the end of a month where we typically assess our efforts. Let's say it's December so we'll write a project brief basically the end of the month or you know an activity report. So it's recapping everything we've done for the month and how that's translated into press or translated into some type of partnership. I think we've done that's had some type of impact on their business. So we're just sharing that with clients on an ongoing basis. And then that sort of stuff also turns into things that we can use. Brian can use this company to build a case study or work examples to share on our Web site or share with other like-minded clients.

JC: So we do case studies—like academic case studies. What are your case studies?

ES: They're all different depending on the type of service that we're trying to sell. So when it comes to PR I'm typically including links to clips that we've gotten for the client or if they've had some type of really great social media campaign that we helped spearhead, screenshots of that. So it varies. But it usually starts out with the issue or the problem we were hired to solve or help solve, how we did that, and what the results are.

JC: It sounds like both of those are kind of like audit and then a reporting out.

ES: Yeah, basically

JC: And there was a third document?

ES: For things that I'm writing on a day to day basis, a pitch that I'm sharing with media. I mean we're doing that all day basically. So again that's identifying we've already identified the story with our clients and I've probably identified a writer I want to share that with. So it's creating a really succinct pitch that will get their attention and compel them to write a story about a client. So we're writing-- We do that all the time.

JC: What would a pitch look like in output?

ES: I like to keep pitches pretty short. I think some people can get-- It's just too long and a writer will never read it. You have to keep in mind how busy the recipient-- They get tons of-- Editors get tons of e-mails. So you want to make sure you're cutting through all of that with

the pitch that you sent. So I typically try to keep it like three to four sentences. I once had an editor say to me if you can't describe this in a sentence, I'm not going to care.

JC: So it's a little bit different than an entrepreneurial pitch? Like with a deck or whatever?

ES: Yes. A pitch to media is meant to be super short, and you're not writing the story. You're asking the writer to tell the story for you. So it's just like your very best elevator pitch of sorts. OK.

JC: Whom do you write for typically?

ES: What do you mean by that?

JC: Who do you--who do these documents go to?

ES: So let's say a project brief or project recap would go to clients, the decision makers at our client's place of business. Media we're writing for, writing for the social media consumer and people around social. So the audiences vary, but ultimately it's all fine if you're doing the same thing and kind of making your pitch, proving your value.

JC: How much do you tailor specific messages to your audiences?

ES: All the time. That's kind of the name of the game. You have to do it. And I think that's key to being a good publicist is you can't send the same message to five or 10 people. You have to write a tailored pitch for every single person because that's the way you're actually going to get results and change minds. So, you know, I would send a different project recap to maybe a marketing director client versus the person who's like president of the company who's maybe paying the bills or approving budgets. I might tailor those messages slightly, so you know I think it's critical that you're able to do that and everything.

JC: What did you go to school for?

ES: Communication. I think my degree was in corporate communication.

JC: What do you think would you learned in school that prepared you for the first job?

JC: Good question. I have to tell you that I got a lot more value out of interning while in school than a lot of my classes, but my writing classes-- I took a PR writing class specifically.

JC: Do you remember what department that was out of?

ES: Yeah it was in the Com Department. It was Barry Waldman. He's still there. So his PR writing classes, I still think of the little tips and tricks he taught us all the time. So that was

probably one of the most valuable classes, but I think overall just in general college just teaches you how to be accountable and sell your work and work hard for some things.

JC: How many internships did you do?

ES: I had three while I was in college. I started my junior year.

JC: How did past jobs or those those internships prepare you for this?

ES: Um I think from the skill perspective, you know, learning how to work with clients and agency is obviously critical. And working for an agency prior to coming here was very important. Because, again, you have to know kind of how to manage those relationships and how to manage your time effectively. But I would say that every job leads you to your next job. So I think you should always be taking stock of what you're learning and how you can apply it to your current job or where you might want to take that later.

JC You've been in some pretty collaborative work environments. Was that a hard transition because school tends to be very solitary.

ES: That's a great question. Um. I think just by nature I enjoy the collaborative workplace a little bit more. But I think you have to know yourself. Like there's times where I can't work at my desk. It's just-- There's too much distraction going on around me. So I have to move, but now I like to come back and be like-- Just have a conversation with anybody about the client. So I think you kind of have to know how you like to work best and be honest with yourself about that when you look for a job.

JC: Would you say the collaborate to kind of work environment is the exception or the norm anymore?

ES: I think most companies like to think it's the norm. I don't know if that's always the case. We have really no choice but to be collaborative in an open office. But you know the more I hear from colleagues and friends I think it is everyone's kind of leaning to try to be more collaborative.

JC: What learning did you need to do kind of on the job? Either here or the job that led to this one?

ES: Let's say I'll start at the job prior to this one. I was pretty much brand new to PR in the traditional sense, so I really had to learn about the media landscape and how to pitch media. So that was a lot of learning on the job, and you just get better as you go. And I'm still learning and progressing there. As far as coming here, this is an agency that's I mean our bread and butter was really websites back in the day, and we do a lot of tech and digital stuff. So having learned what all that terminology meant because even if I'm not working on that stuff on a day to day basis I need to know how to communicate with everyone here and help

them do their job. So I think keeping up with with all that terminology and how it applies to our clients is pretty critical.

JC: What terminology is most significant.

ES: A lot of website terms that I wasn't familiar with: wireframes, schematics. Like the website building process, I had never.

JC: Do you talk about conversions?

ES: Yeah, for digital marketing, conversions and things-- Even if you're talking about like Web site analytics like bounce rates and referral traffic and that stuff is pretty important. And if I was in school I wish I would have known that. So I would say to your students that it's worth brushing up on all that because you're probably going to deal with it in some form or fashion.

JC: Yeah I think-- Did you have this impression when you were at the College that it felt like a very printy environment—like print-based environment?

ES: It did but I mean this was before— I remember we-- When I was a senior like in my last semester we were learning about Twitter. Like what Twitter was-- No one knew what to make of it. So things have happened so fast in the last decade. But yeah it was pretty print-focused, but that's kind of the way things still were. We did some digital but not much.

JC: It's still kind of is.

ES: Is it?

JC: And it's hard to convey like how centra—Like even some of those terms that you've [referenced]—Because bounce rate adds up to--Like that's a clear metric for reputation. That's a clear metric for relevance.

ES: Yeah exactly. Yeah I'm surprised here that there's—

JC: It's just hard. There's a hard there's not quite an infrastructure yet. Especially for student production. Like most of the digital infrastructure is about how people like me deliver digital content for you. Okay. Not how students deliver digital content back to me.

ES: Interesting. Yeah. Yeah it's important. I mean it's really important. It's something you can definitely learn a couple of months just by working in it you're more familiar with it. But I mean it's huge.

JC: Could you point to some digital literacies that are crucial just for PR? Particular software? Or particular functions in software?

ES: Google Analytics for what--for what I do from a PR perspective. That's something I'm pretty familiar with but I'm not sure a lot of publicists are. But it's great because again it helps prove your value. Or let's say you get a placement in the New York Times or someone linked back to your Web site, you should be able to say like this sent over thousands of people. So Google Analytics for me is big. Um. Frankly I don't use a ton of tech in what I do. I could probably be probably be doing more. But I could follow up with some other things that my colleagues use. But Google Analytics for me in the PR world is probably the one of most important things. Or just knowing like how to analyze the data that Facebook or Instagram has available to businesses. Like that's important to.

JC: I don't know how much office stuff is being passed around, but is TrackChanges or version control important for you?

ES: Yeah it is. Our PR department is pretty small. There's only three of us. So we're collaborating and editing each other's work all the time. So we've been using Google Docs a lot lately versus Word or Pages or something. But we do we edit in TrackChanges or add comments. So yeah.

JC: Because even that sort of new.

ES: Really?

JC: Yeah. Oh yeah.

ES: Well I guess you know I hadn't done that-- I was first introduced to that at my former agency. I read something and someone completely red lined it, changing what I said.

JC: But once you sort of start using it, it's hard to imagine not. I use it all the time. I collaborate a lot. I can't imagine not having it. So if you were hiring someone for a position similar to yours, what would you look for in a candidate? What would you look for in their materials?

ES: In a candidate, I think strong writing skills is probably number one, and I typically when we're hiring people, I ask them for work samples in a variety of different styles of writing. So I just want to know that they're able to be creative, kind of think on their feet. You really have to be willing to be kind of scrappy and creative in everything you do. Because you might not always have the resources you need but you need to be creative.

JC: Kind of doing more with less?

ES: Yeah exactly. Let's see. What else is big? Work experience—

JC: In terms of the sample, what kinds of documents? Like what would an outstanding sample include?

ES: What we've done from time to time has been a writing test. So I think one--Something that we did recently because we just made a hire was to write a short version or a long version of your own bio. So kind of like selling yourself in different ways. And we've also asked from them from time to time like we're trying to land a story about X in this publication. How would you pitch this person? So again I'm hoping to see a really short succinct pitch that is pretty compelling.

JC: I guess they don't necessarily need to share a finished PR product?

ES: If you're ever able to show--I'm not big on press releases but let's say you had a finished press release on hand that you'd written and that had translated into press. That's great. I love see stuff like that. Or if you can point to creative places that you got from a good pitch, that's kind of the stuff that I like to see. But not everyone has that. Especially entry level people they don't typically have that but someone more senior I'd certainly expect to see stuff like that.

JC: Why don't you love press releases?

ES: Again it kind of goes back to that concept of--If a writer receives a press release, they can assume that 20 other writers have also received the same thing.

JC: So it hasn't been adapted.

ES: It hasn't been adapted. It hasn't been tailored. It serves a purpose. Let's say we're working with a restaurant who's opened a new location in Nashville or something. A press release is important because you've outlined all the facts there for someone, and that's the type of information a writer will eventually need. But I will never pitch a story in a press release. You've got to take the time to tailor that message and. pare your target pitch list down to like five people. So yeah.

JC: We talked a little bit about what effective writing looks like in this job. What do effective writers know and know how to do this job?

ES: Keep it--keep it brief I think. Clear, brief, compelling writing. I think kind of--That's kind of it. Of course sometimes like--We have a copy director here and she's writing these beautiful About statements and manifestos and website copy, so she's able to be a little bit more eloquent and wordy. But when we're trying to relay a message to someone with a very short attention span, it's gotta be be like brief and succinct. So you gotta know how to do both those things to be effective.

JC: Kind of write the longform and the short?

ES: Yeah.

JC: If you could do anything different before starting this job particularly in terms of learning and experience? What would you do?

ES: Great question. It's a really great question. Um. I probably would have been a little bit more familiar with the tech world and what's happening there. And also had a little bit more understanding of how creative agencies work and operate. Because, again, it's different from-- We have so many different concentrations, and prior to this it was one concentration. It was just PR. Right. So I think knowing a little bit more about what it means to be Creative Director or Copy Director or Strategy Director--Just better informing yourself with all those different—

JC: Kind of like organizational knowledge? Job title knowledge? kind of job kind of organizational job title

ES: Yeah exactly. I think it's important.

JC: Have you noticed a lot of diversity in job titles like just in a position like yours, how many different ways does it get named, or is it pretty—

ES: Here it's like you can pick your own job titles for the most part. We're not big on titles for let's say my prior agency that was again just solely focused on PR, we had more structure titles just to kind of show where you were right in here ranking there. So you were if you started out, you were first a coordinator. Then you moved up to manager, senior manager, director, so that was more clear like how you advance. But at a place like this where you kind of like chart your own path, you can do whatever you want for the most part.

JC: Part of what I'm hearing students is that if you type a writer into like a job search database, you don't glean very much. But if you type copywriter or public relations or content marketing or content specialist, you get—

ES: It's safe to assume that any communication function is going to be heavy on writing. And what I found-- What I'm finding a lot of which is sad if you love media and magazines and so forth is as magazines have folded or downsized, a lot of the editors that I used to work with are now working for creative agencies creating copy. So they're still writing, and they're probably making more money now. But those traditional jobs and that notion of what it means to be a writer I think is changing a bit. So I say there's tons of writing jobs out there.

JC: I'd agree. They just go by different name.

ES: Exactly. So I don't think you'll really ever find--You won't find much under writer.

JC: You won't find feature writer for instance.

ES: Probably not. They're few and far between right now. But you can be a feature writer here. You can write features for a website that we're building. So yeah there are jobs out there.

JC: I totally agree. It's just-- If you know book editor and feature writer and go looking for that--

ES: You might find like 10 people with those jobs and probably no openings.

JC: Right. Okay. Anything else you'd like to share with me?

ES: No I don't think so. I really think that people who are studying writing are awesome. And it's really important. And no matter what you do, you are going to be good at it. That's my closing thing.

JC: Thanks for your time.