

# Restoring Trust In Cynical Times

Ron Culp

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I always enjoy talking with young people about career choices, and it is a special pleasure to speak to students who have chosen to pursue work in a field that I love—public relations.

Those of you here today are indeed coming of age—in *a professional sense*—in an interesting time. And you have chosen a challenging career path in which to make your mark. Not since the Great Depression of the last century has there been so much economic and political turmoil. And this might very well complicate your plans for the future.

When it comes to politics, I consider myself a constructive cynic. So I have not yet consumed the collective Kool-Aid that professes that Tuesday's election will make everything better—but I am hopeful. In fact, my horoscope, which I read religiously (much to my wife's chagrin), said: "It's hard to stay positive when those you trust let you down. But keep in mind that you may be placing unrealistic expectations on others that, in turn, set you up for disappointment. Keep the faith."

Without a doubt, President-elect Obama faces a litany of challenges, not the least of which is the need to restore trust—in *our government, our financial institutions, and in business in general*. All three areas are staggering under varying degrees of malfeasance and distrust. Without progress on all three fronts, the currently troubled job market will become even more challenging when you graduate.

Even if you land the PR job of your dreams, chances are that building trust and confidence—a key part of any PR job—will be tougher than you might imagine. Long before the recent financial crisis, numerous surveys showed declining public trust in corporations and government. And even the level of trust in non-profit and non-government institutions is unimpressive. Many people are cynical, and they don't mind sharing their cynicism with the rest of the public—the same public with whom it will be your job to establish trust.

Whether you wind up working for a public relations agency, serving on a corporate communications team, or handling PR for a non-profit, the general media and nearly anyone with a blog will be suspicious of the words you write, the events you organize and the products and causes you promote.

So how will you possibly succeed in your careers?

President-elect Obama's campaign offers a bit of insight. From the time the little-known junior senator from Illinois launched his campaign, he seemingly has been surrounded

with more optimists than cynics—people who sincerely believe they can make a difference. That helped inspire trust and a hope for change in millions of people who never trusted government enough to even bother voting before.

The lesson is that a positive, can-do attitude will go a long way. And since today is PR Day, I want to point out that it is a lot easier to have such an attitude if you're pursuing a career you love.

In preparing for today's remarks, I talked with more than 20 young people who have a lot of faith that what they do can truly make a difference. They, like me, feel that you can succeed in whatever you do if you simply pursue your passion. From some of their stories, I hope you can gain a sense of the importance of following your own personal compass—and that won't always be going after the job that pays more money.

Since I started with politics—a topic that hangs heavy in the air this momentous week—let me tell you first about Justin DeJong, who, after graduating from college, took an unpaid internship in the mayor of Chicago's press office. He went on to hold paid positions at a utility company, in state government agencies and other organizations. But he always took time to volunteer for political campaigns—something he loved. Now, at 29, Justin is on leave from a great job as the PR director of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce to serve as Obama's Illinois press secretary. His passion and his commitment to follow it landed him in the right place at the right time. And in this job market, he is doing one full-time job and has another one on hold.

Before I start sounding like a starry-eyed Democrat—which I am not, by the way—let me also tell you about a couple of other young people following their passions on the other side of the aisle. One of them, a young woman named Rebecca Neale, has been working in Washington, D.C. since her graduation from Indiana University in 2004.

After one internship at a small Indianapolis PR firm between her sophomore and junior years, Rebecca went online to see what other opportunities might be available in Washington before her final year in college. Shortly after submitting her application on the White House Web site, Rebecca landed an internship in the First Lady's press office. Upon graduation from college, she got a job in the Energy Department's PR department, where, at 23, she was staffing interviews with Secretary Samuel Bodman and helping with the media strategy to gain support for the Administration's important Energy Bill.

Through hard work and building her network, Rebecca was recruited to the Education Department, where at the age of 25 she became Deputy Press Secretary. Now at just 26, Rebecca works in the White House Press Office, where she supports the communications efforts behind two important presidential initiatives. I talked with Rebecca a couple of days after she served as the PR point person for the White House Summit for International Development. She's in love with her job.

But there's always an "elephant in the room" when talking with anyone associated with the least popular President in recent history, I had to ask her how she maintains her

positive attitude in these cynical times. Without a pause, Rebecca said it is a “matter of conviction.” She sees first hand that the administration is doing much more good than it is getting credit for. The high point of her White House experience was her role on the President’s trip to Africa earlier this year as part of the Administration’s huge AIDS initiative, which is saving hundreds of thousands of lives.

And she also cited school programs and a multitude of other good deeds that go unnoticed by a media that is fixated with the negatives.

No matter which way you lean politically, Rebecca does something that I recommend to each of you. She reflects on just completed projects and continually does a self-evaluation, asking, “What are the lessons learned and how might I have done things better?”

She actually maintains her own Top 10 List of Professional Lessons Learned, and I talked her into sharing them with us:

### **REBECCA’S TOP 10**

1. Live beyond the “now.”
2. You are your own best advocate.
3. Play to your strengths.
4. Career building happens through networking—keep those networks alive.
5. Manage up.
6. The devil is in the details—work to get things done right the *first time*.
7. “Eighty percent of success is showing up” (Woody Allen)—and stepping up.
8. In the work environment, keep your personal life personal.
9. Learn from your wins **and** losses—and those of others.
10. Make the most of your current situation—every experience is a learning opportunity.

The next young person I wanted to briefly mention applied via e-mail for an internship in the U.S. Congress between his junior and senior year—**IN HIGH SCHOOL**. It was an unpaid internship (He was seeking resume-building material for upcoming college applications and had a passion for history and government.), and it led to a paid internship the following year, then two others in Washington, including one with the then-Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert. Upon graduation from Marquette University, he was hired full-time by Congressman John Shimkus with whom he had served that first unpaid internship.

At this very moment, that 25-year-old is on his way back to Washington after helping run his bosses’ successful re-election campaign in southern Illinois. In Washington, he is a Legislative Assistant and is the point person in the Congressman’s office for issues involving military, transportation, energy, education, labor, small business and veteran’s affairs.

This young man loves and respects the political process, and he is following his passion. And I'm proud to let you know that he is my eldest son, Grant. My other son, Brad, followed his journalistic passion in much the same way. A "cold call" e-mail to the editor of *Triathlete Magazine* (*He was a journalism major and a triathlete.*) led first to a summer internship there (unpaid, once again) between his junior and senior years at Miami University. Today he lives in LaJolla, California, and is a writer and editor at *Triathlete*, and in just over a year, he has already traveled much of the world covering and racing in triathlons. I've had the pleasure of watching my two sons turn their passions and positive attitudes into careers. It's an amazing thing to witness firsthand.

Now, let me ask, how many of you have heard of PRSSA?

Great. If you truly want to have a career in PR, I encourage all of you to take advantage of PRSSA. The near-term and long-term experiences and relationships are well worth your while.

Let me tell you about Kevin Saghy. Kevin got involved in PRSSA at Ohio Northern University. Within two years, he was elected President of PRSSA nationally, and he had many accomplishments, including building international relationships that led to the creation of the Public Relations Student International Coalition. Now students from across the globe can research other nation's PR cultures and programs through [www.prssa.org/prsic](http://www.prssa.org/prsic). Importantly, through his PRSSA involvement, Kevin served on the Plank Center advisory board where he met and impressed his future employer—*me*.

Kevin's dedication and enthusiasm for PR—even before searching for his first job—convinced me that he would fare well in our agency even during cynical or other difficult times. And that he would be a credit to our industry. He, indeed, is that.

Other PRSSA officers have had similar luck landing jobs without really searching. Bryan Blaise is working at his top-choice agency, Fleishman-Hillard, after meeting agency leaders at an event where he was highly visible. And Sarah Yeane capitalized on her PRSSA presidency and is now working in Ketchum's New York office on clients including Bank of America, Geek Squad, Hyatt Hotels and Kodak. Kevin, Bryan and Sarah made the most of their college experience—they had fun, but they wisely devoted time to building their networks that led to excellent jobs.

Many other recent graduates are making a difference in the work they are doing within their companies and agencies—and it is because they are passionate about the work and the causes. Twenty-somethings in our office are playing integral roles in green energy programs for clients ranging from Kellogg's to Silk Soymilk to FedEx to Kleenex. There are hundreds of similar stories taking place within PR agencies, corporations and nonprofit organizations every day. Market-savvy companies are, and will only continue to be, more desperately in need of market-savvy, technology-minded individuals to help find new approaches and new answers to complex problems.

But the competition is stiff.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor statistics, there are 243,000 employed public relations professionals in the United States. By 2016 that number is expected to rise by 18%, which is a faster growth rate than many other professions. But right now, current economic conditions are slowing down retirement plans of many of us Boomer practitioners, thus delaying job openings. And with some 35,000 students currently pursuing PR degrees at more than 700 colleges and universities, it becomes even more important for you to differentiate yourself.

No longer will one PR internship land that full-time job. In my estimation, you need at least two. And you should fill your resume now with relevant non-profit and college experiences that demonstrate your passion for the profession.

And later, as you begin climbing your career ladder, you should remember Rebecca Neal – the former intern to First Lady Laura Bush—and develop your own guiding principles similar to her Top 10. The ones I keep in mind come from the first person in a public relations position to ever serve as vice president of a major corporation: Arthur Page.

Page headed PR at AT&T for nearly two decades, serving from 1927 to 1946. It is by no means an accident that his wisdom inspired the creation of an association of fellow PR heads who ascribe to his philosophy about our roles in this fascinating profession.

Let me cite these principles to you—and offer the hope that someone passes them along to our newly elected individuals headed to Washington since they are worthy guidelines for many professionals.

**Tell the truth.** Let the public know what's happening and provide an accurate picture of the company's character, ideals and practices.

**Prove it with action.** Public perception of an organization is determined 90% by what it does and 10% by what it says.

**Listen to the customer.** To serve the company well, understand what the public wants and needs. Keep top decision makers and other employees informed about public reaction to company products, policies and practices.

**Manage for tomorrow.** Anticipate public reaction and eliminate practices that create difficulties. Generate goodwill.

**Conduct public relations as if the whole company (or government) depends on it.**

**Realize a company's (or a nation's) character is expressed by its people.**

**Finally, my favorite—remain calm, patient and good-humored.** This is hard to do with today's 24-hour news cycle and endless number of detractors and watchdog groups. But when a crisis arises, remember, cool heads communicate best.

I've been a member of the Arthur Page Society since my third public relations job when I became head of a corporate function. And not a day goes by that I don't call upon some or all of these seven principles as I navigate through PR minefields.

I hope that each of you can find your niche under the broad PR umbrella. And that like the young people I mentioned, including my own young sons, you get to follow your passion while doing it.

You see, restoring trust is, indeed possible. It starts when people are able to pursue their passions—the very personal goals they set for themselves. The great thing about public relations is that you are entering a profession where no one will say, “That's not possible.”

Never did I think that a small town Indiana boy graduating in a class of 40 students would have done as much as I have had the pleasure to do over the past many years. I have met every President since Richard Nixon, had dinner with Princess Diana, Oprah, and, more importantly, Michael Jordan, and I worked with CEOs and rock stars. It all happened because I love what I do, and have been blessed with bosses and mentors who never said, “That's not possible.”

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you today, and good luck with your careers.