

Local and Regional

# Commentary

## Ten lessons for college grads

OK, so you have the degree and the technical skills. Here's how to build on that all-important first job and develop a career.

By J. Michael Adams

**T**he first job after college is the most important in anyone's career because it establishes the foundation of a lifelong professional reputation. With that in mind, here are 10 lessons recent graduates may not have learned in school. They should learn them now, if they want to build that critical first job into a successful career.

**1. Don't be a hermit.** A few years ago, I helped a graduate land a job, only to learn he was fired after just six months. When I called his boss to ask about the problem, I was told: "John performed his job well, but never said 'good morning' to anyone. He was just too aloof to fit in here." Casual interaction with peers, whether it's a coffee-break talk or a shared lunch is what creates the bonds that make professional interaction more effective.



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**2. Dress to the culture.** Distinctive dress is part of the college scene, but not the workplace. In the corporate community mavericks are often cut loose from the herd. If the culture calls for a suit, buy a good one and keep it clean and pressed. Even if the culture is long hair, jeans and a T-shirt, the T-shirt had better not have spots on it, and the hair should be clean and combed.

**3. Winners always arrive early.** Being on time is no longer sufficient, whether it's the start of the workday or of a meeting. Some think "Coming in late is OK as long as you stay late." Wrong! It simply doesn't work that way. You must be present or you will be viewed as a slacker.

**4. Be ready for surprises.** Always carry a pen and a pad, or note cards with you. If you prefer to use a PDA or palm device, make sure you can take notes quickly. It can save your job, especially when your manager calls you into her office the first week on the job and reels off the five things she wants done by tomorrow. Can

you imagine her reaction if you have to ask to borrow a pen and a piece of paper?

**5. Read it twice before hitting "send."** Professional electronic communication is vastly different from the instant messaging you do with your friends. Brevity is a virtue and also diminishes the chance of typos or errors. Always ask the question, "Would I feel OK if this message appeared on the front page of the company newsletter tomorrow morning?" Keep it brief and read it twice.

**6. Put it on paper.** Important communication is always on paper — or in a text file attachment that can be printed out. Write clearly and to the point. Don't try to be "cool" or clever. Neither has much value in the workplace. An effective outline for nearly any memo is: a. define the problem, b. offer your analysis and c. make a recommendation. Find someone you trust who will proofread and edit everything before you send it. If you can keep it to two pages or less, you will be viewed with appreciation and awe.

**7. Know your place, rookie.** You may have been a senior last year, but you will soon find yourself back in freshman mode. Prepare for this, and recognize that you don't have the knowledge base to express strong positions right away. Of course, always respond to queries, but initially listen, and ask questions before offering a contrary opinion. Wisdom and respect come from first learning the local culture — people, principles and priorities. Remember, the goal is to be included in the sophomore class.

**8. Use technology, but don't let it define you.** You will probably be a step ahead of many in your company when it comes to using technology. Some people love gadgets and revel in demonstrating knowledge and expertise. However, these are only tools. You will always be more valued for your ability to think, work with others, and solve problems. Don't start with the tool and look for a use. Begin with the

problem and select the best tool.

**9. Read one major newspaper every day.** The greatest influences on your organization will come from outside the workplace. Having a handle on what's going on in the world will give you a competitive edge. View it as always being ready for a pop quiz during those pre-meeting chats with your boss. It's also what successful professionals do.

**10. Let your workspace show your personality, but be thoughtful.** Decorations, or lack thereof, send strong personal messages, as does neatness or sloppiness. It is important to think about the messages you want to send. Messy desks and flippant signs say a lot about you, but so do tasteful, humorous cartoons and interesting photos. Make your workspace a reflection of how you want to be perceived.

Your first job after college will probably not be the type of position you see yourself working in for the rest of your life. However, it's less important what your first job is about than the type of person you prove yourself to be doing it.

J. Michael Adams is president of Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey, and a former business owner.



STEVE ANSUL



# The 10 Great General Truths

## Among them: Always remember to say thank you

On Feb. 2, Nancy Wood, APR, Fellow PRSA, 2004 Order of the Phoenix and Georgia PRSA Hall of Fame Inductee, addressed students at Grady College's 12th Annual PR Day at The University of Georgia.

The Order of the Phoenix honors PR professionals for outstanding careers, and dedication to the Georgia Chapter ([www.prsa.org](http://www.prsa.org)). Recipients are recognized for a long-standing reputation as a leader in the field, high standards of ethics, a history of personal commitment to serve the common good through community involvement and at least 20 years of service to the profession and PRSA.

Wood is owner and principal of Communications Consultants, serving clients in divergent industries, including health care and publishing.

She holds a bachelor's degree in public relations and a master's in journalism from The University of Alabama, where she was named Outstanding Graduate Student in Journalism. Wood is a former chairman of PRSA's Universal Accreditation Board.

This is an edited version of her inspirational talk.

When I started thinking about what I would say to the PR students here today, I really had to stop and take a little trip down memory lane.

I was a student once upon a time. I went to luncheons like this and politely listened as people — who clearly were ancient — tell me about their careers.

I always thought to myself, "how in the world could someone my parents' age understand what I'm doing — and what I'm up against?" So I hereby concede to some ignorance about exactly what you're facing today. But I do know you're being offered an exceptional education and I hope you're taking advantage of the opportunities you're being given.

In fact, the students I've met here over the years have been bright, motivated and keenly aware of the challenges before them. You are far better prepared to face the world than I was at your age. Frankly, I didn't have a clue.

But somewhere along the way, we all discover who we really are, what we're truly interested in and where our real talents lie. I consider myself lucky to have found a career path that has been so rewarding.

The truth is, I've been in this profession for 25 years. When I was your age, there were no computers, no e-mail, no iPods and no Blackberries. What you



Nancy Wood, APR, Fellow PRSA

were practically born knowing and understanding. I've had to learn and relearn — especially how to retrieve cell phone messages!

So I am not going to talk about what to do when you graduate or tell you how to get your first job.

I've decided to talk about some things I didn't learn in college. Some of them I learned the hard way. Some of them you may think you already know. Trust me. There are some lessons to be learned.

I call these my Great General Truths and I'm delighted to share them.

### No. 1. You will always have homework.

Just because you went to college, don't operate under the assumption that there's nothing left to learn. One of the most gratifying things about this profession is being put in a position to learn new things. Understanding how a business works, writing about a new subject, meeting experts in fields you've never even heard of... and you will learn a lot of these things when you're not sitting at an actual desk during actual business hours.

### No. 2. You will never watch the news or read a newspaper or magazine the same way again.

You certainly don't have to read the paper with an Exacto knife in your hand like I did at your age, but you'll see — hear — and read things that you'll just have to make a note about. The well-written article, that front-page coverage your competitor got or a new statistic you need to make sure your boss heard.

### No. 3. Listening is both an art and a skill.

Listening may be the most under-used skill in the workplace today. If you're not a good listener, practice. Now, this particular skill not only will help you learn a great deal, but once you're good at it, you can even do what I like to call "listen between the lines."

This becomes especially handy when you're stuck in the middle of the age-old sport of corporate game playing. It's an interesting sport — there generally are teams involved and intricate strategies played out on an unlevel field, but, if you really listen, you'll be able to figure out who's winning and why.

### No. 4. Beware of pretenders.

Chances are somewhere along the way, you may have to report to someone you don't think is as smart as you are. This is the Peter Principle in action.

If you're unfamiliar with the book of the same name by Laurence J. Peter, the Peter Principle, in essence, says peo-

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ple rise to their level of incompetence. Just because someone is in a certain job, don't assume they know how to do it. But don't despair — and try to keep your intelligence from looking like arrogance.

Continue doing your best work, because regardless of what happens, good work ultimately gets recognized. Sometimes, it just takes longer than you think it should.

### No. 5. Asking people about themselves will make you both charming and popular.

Ninety-nine percent of the people you will ever meet want to talk about themselves. All you have to do is ask. This tactic can be beneficial in two ways. You may learn something interesting, or you will be able to eat your meal at the bor-

ing banquet while the person to your right prattles on about his or herself!

### No. 6. Don't look for your name.

For my entire career, my parents have been upset that my name didn't appear on anything I wrote or produced. You can try to explain it to your parents, but unless they're in this profession, they will not get it.

Ultimately, they will stop asking.

### No. 7. Don't plan your future.

There's a saying that life happens while you're busy making plans. This is actually true. There will be opportunities that come your way, but if your eyes are closed, you may miss a chance to do something important.

If you can, take a little time between graduation and joining the work force. Go someplace you've always wanted to go. Because once you get that first job, your next vacation will feel like it's a lifetime away.

### No. 8. All you have is your reputation.

Recently we've seen some examples of unethical behavior by people who should know better. They now have to live with the consequences of their actions. When you choose this profession, you must choose to bring your integrity and high standards of ethical behavior to your job every day.

### No. 9. It's important to give back.

This may be the most valuable thing you ever do — and don't underestimate it. You've been given a good education, a chance to make a mark in the world. There are groups and individuals who need you and your talent.

Find a cause that means something to you and volunteer your time. It's quite true that you get back more than you give. When you're young, you have a greater opportunity to show your talent — prove yourself — and make this troubled world a better place in the process.

### No. 10. Remember to say thank you.

You may find that you have to thank yourself for a job well done. Occasionally people in positions of authority will forget to say these two important words. I encourage you not to become one of them.

It's even more important to thank the people who help you along the way. And when it's your turn, I encourage you to help others. **1**





## Ten lessons that aren't in the textbooks: Helping students launch and succeed in their PR careers

By Jacob C. Farbman, M.A., APR

Over the last five years, I've enjoyed educating hundreds of students in Strategies of Public Relations, the lone PR course in The College of New Jersey's communication studies major. As an adjunct professor, I tell students that my job is to prepare them to succeed in their PR careers and in life.

To that end, here are 10 lessons I've shared with my students that others should find helpful as they launch and advance their PR careers:

**1) Book informational interviews.** You've decided. You want to be a PR practitioner. But you aren't sure what sector you want a career in. What are the day-to-day, real-world differences among

agency, corporate, education, government, health care, hospitality, nonprofit, sports and travel public relations?

One way to find out is to contact PR practitioners and request informational interviews. Narrow your options down to five that interest you and book informational interviews with PR practitioners in those areas.

For example, spend about an hour

asking an agency PR practitioner questions about the steps needed to take to start a career in agency public relations. Repeat the process for your other choices. You'll get great insights unavailable in any textbook.

**2) While in college, work in as many internships as you can.** Some PR practitioners say that you only need one internship to launch your PR career.

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I suggest students work in many internships to make themselves as marketable as possible. Experience gained in one internship will help create a portfolio for future job interviews; several internships will expand your résumé and help you decide which area of public relations you want to pursue.

**3) Network with PR practitioners.** You can graduate from any college or university and earn straight A's, but if you don't network with PR professionals, you will have a difficult time finding a job. The same holds true with advancing your career. In public relations, many positions are advertised word-of-mouth. By attending networking events — no matter how large or small — you get your name out there with working professionals looking for new talent.

**4) Establish and maintain your reputation.** Your reputation is the one thing that will set you apart from everyone else. Work hard every day to build and maintain your professional reputation.

**5) When you go to your boss with a problem, always present possible solutions.** There are two advantages to this. First, you won't be perceived as someone who dumps problems on others. Second, others in the organization will see you as a problem solver.

**6) Don't be a "yes person."** The last thing your organization needs is someone who agrees with every idea the boss has — even bad ones. PR practitioners have to counsel management by painting real-world scenarios so management can make decisions that mutually benefit the organization and its audiences.

No matter where you are on the organizational chart, if you do not agree with your boss's idea, counsel him or her with action/reaction examples such as "if we do A, it's possible that B, C or D will happen." This will help your boss solve problems, as well as help build your credibility as a strategic PR counselor.

**7) Praise others in public.** When

someone you work with does a great job on a project, tell that person — in front of others. You'll leave that person feeling good about the work he or she did.

**8) Criticize others behind closed doors.** When someone you work with causes you "professional tension," talk to the person about it behind closed doors. The office won't benefit from a public confrontation. Remember to also put yourself in the other person's place as you tactfully work through the problem.

**9) When in doubt, ask questions.** While in graduate school, my mentor, Rich Bagin, APR, executive director of the National School Public Relations Association, gave me great advice: "Asking questions is a sign of strength, never weakness."

For example, if you don't understand why the PR director decided to create a brochure for an audience instead of creating a specialized Web site, ask why. It may turn out that the brochure is targeted to an audience that does not use the Internet

to get information. By asking questions, you will strengthen your knowledge about strategic public relations.

**10) Keep in touch with former professors and previous employers.** You never know when you may need advice to solve a problem, a person to run an idea by or a reference for a new job. Former professors are also a good resource to turn to when looking for a new job. In many cases, PR professionals looking to fill a position reach out to PR professors to help them find the right person for the job. If your former professors know that you are looking to change jobs, your search will become much easier. **T**



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