

Wanted: Multi-PR Linguist¹

Jay A. Rubin²

“If you heard about this job, would you be interested? More important, would you be qualified?”

European university seeks “Multi-PR Linguist” to lead communication team into the future. Must be fluent in traditional academic parlance *and* evolving social media languages necessary to attract students, faculty, grants and positive news coverage during time of seminal change. Must also be confident in ability to become trusted advisor to rector, deans and senior staff. Position offers strong growth potential beyond public relations, extending to university’s marketing, advertising and other reputation management initiatives. Attractive compensation package is commensurate with vision, knowledge and experience.

Prospective candidates are strongly encouraged to self-evaluate their suitability for this newly created position by considering the search committee’s primary assumptions and explanation (below).

Assumption #1

The classic rules of communication remain valid as new digital platforms, the Bologna Process and global economic pressures prompt a rethinking of university public relations strategies.

¹ This paper was presented at the XXII Annual Conference of the European University Public Relations and Information Officers, which was celebrated in Stresa (Italy), on 1st-4th September 2010. The original can be found at <http://www.euprio.org/getfile.php/Filer/proceedings%202010/Papers%5CRubin.pdf>

² JAY RUBIN is a an adjunct professor at New York University, a media consultant and PR writing coach. Over the years, his clients have included amfAR/The Foundation for AIDS Research, Bain & Company, Disney/ABC Media Networks, Gerber Baby Products, Marvel Entertainment, Public Service Electric & Gas and Scholastic Inc., among numerous others. At New York University, Rubin teaches graduate students in the Public Relations and Corporate Communication program and undergraduates at the Stern School of Business. He is a recipient of the Award for Teaching Excellence from NYU’s School of Continuing and Professional Studies. In addition, Rubin conducts writing seminars at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, and he is a frequent speaker on media and popular culture topics at various universities, corporate meetings and community events. Earlier in his career, Rubin led the public relations team at Request Television, the first national pay-per-view cable TV service in the U.S. He has also held top editorial management positions at several business publications and has written many widely read articles on media issues. He tweets as scribeprof and can be reached at jayrubin@nyu.edu.

Explanation

All those applying for the position of Multi-PR Linguist must be committed to the three principles of persuasion – ethos, logos and pathos -- espoused by Aristotle more than 2,000 years ago. In a contemporary context, these tenets translate to credibility, logic and connection. Candidates must also express a modern strategic vision evoking Quintilian's spirit of "Vir Bonus: the good man [and woman] speaking [and writing] well."

Adherence to William Zinsser's "four articles of faith: clarity, simplicity, brevity and humanity" (*On Writing Well*) will be required for all university communication to include news releases, speeches, Facebook pages, blogs, tweets and so forth. The practical wisdom of other experts past and present, such as William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White (*The Elements of Style*), will offer additional guidance.

These evergreen principles will provide the incoming Multi-PR Linguist with the necessary framework to ascertain, prioritize and balance the communication needs of our increasingly diverse roster stakeholders.

The search committee believes the time is right for our university to actively pursue the benefits of social media PR we are witnessing among early adopters. We have created the title "Multi-PR Linguist" at our university to signal our commitment to more expansive responsibilities than typically associated with monikers such as "public information officer" or "public relations director."

We will rely upon our Multi-PR Linguist's expert judgment to determine, on a case-by-case basis, when our university's best interests are served by lengthy, comprehensive and intellectually-laden prose of academic parlance; the crisp clarity a 140-character Twitter post; the formulaic who, what, when, where, why and how and inverted pyramid of a press release; the less formal community-building language of Facebook; and myriad other languages and platforms certain to emerge.

As the Multi-PR Linguist reshapes policies and practices, the administration will require frequent status reports on (1) overall communication trends and (2) specific university strategies. These internal memos must justify how classic rules of communication underpin all new public relations initiatives.

Trends in critical areas, such as media relations, should be documented: e.g. Cision Research Europe's 2010 Social Journalism Study showing that 74% of journalists in the United Kingdom and about 50% in France and Germany consider social media a "somewhat important" or "important" tool. Such information will enable the university administration to better understand how a traditional rule of communication – in this case: "know thy audience" – motivates the Multi-PR Linguist to seek a more visible presence for university news through Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other social media.

Similarly, the university should be regularly informed about new PR efforts to better position our institution as a recipient of foundation grants from both European and non-European sources. This, for example, could include an update of our social media outreach to groups such as the Foundation Center Grantmaker Leadership Panel, comprising chief executives of foundations that make grants totaling over US\$7 billion annually. A recent survey from the Foundation Center reported that one-third of these CEOs regularly use Facebook and read blogs.

The search committee recognizes that one of the initial challenges facing the Multi-PR Linguist will be to overcome the traditional perception of the university communicator as a functionary with a relatively limited voice in the senior-level decision-making process. This undervaluing of the communication team, common at many universities, is no longer tenable given the transformative challenges ahead due to global economic pressures and likely reforms from the Bologna Process.

We therefore are in accord with the message Jean-Marc Rapp, president of the European University Association, delivered at the annual Euprio conference this September in Stresa, Italy:

“... university communicators will need to play an increasingly strategic role within and outside the university community through their contribution to the development of communication strategies in line with the overall aims and missions of the university.”

Assumption #2

Even the most conservative segments of our university community can be persuaded that it is in their best interests to embrace a multi-PR lingual approach that includes evolving social media languages and platforms.

Explanation

Admittedly, there were members of this search committee who initially dismissed social media as a repository of frivolous – or worse, unseemly – languages. Our first impressions of Facebook-friending, Twitter-talk and the like seemed too true to the name “social” media. Upon further reflection, we realized this view to be short sighted and now regard social media as fully consistent with traditional Aristotelian values of ethos, logos and pathos.

• ***Ethos/credibility:***

If our university is what we proclaim it to be – where innovative approaches to substance and style are valued – it would be curious to isolate our communication team from new avenues of public relations. How credible can we be as thought leaders if we hold tight to the comfort level of our

traditional academic parlance and refuse new opportunities to reach out to the next generation in their languages?

It is true that social media has gained its first foothold by focusing primarily on less than the highest-minded content. However, this is no different than the progression of other media. Home video several decades ago, for example, caused trepidation as a vehicle for private viewing of sexual content. Today, of course, videos also enrich the educational experience with easy access to lectures, documentaries, plays and so forth.

Concern about new media is nothing new: No doubt many medieval monks who were hand-lettering and illustrating bibles were apprehensive about Gutenberg's movable type.

- **Logos/logic:**

Growing evidence shows that social media is changing research models. As a leading research university, we logically must always be open to the big picture. Regardless of the enthusiastic tone of digital communication analyst Brian Solis of the Silicon Valley agency FutureWorks, his central premise seems valid. About Twitter, he wrote:

"Twitter has become a human seismograph, measuring and broadcasting the pulse of not just the Web, but also world and local events. News no longer breaks, it Tweets. And if you're plugged-in to the human seismograph, you are part of a movement.... You become part of the new information system. In many ways, Twitter's openness creates a new genre of digital anthropologists, sociologists and ethnographers."

- **Pathos/connection:**

As previously indicated, the incoming Multi-PR Linguist can expect to encounter pockets of resistance to social media. To facilitate a learning curve, the university is prepared to support a series of seminars for faculty members and administrators. We look forward to thought-provoking forums that consider the numerous ways other European universities are using social media to promote academics, research grants and special programs.

Representative examples could include (1) @Stockholm_Uni tweets e.g. "Stockholm University researchers are active in several of the Nobel Committees that help decide the Nobel awards - <http://bit.ly/dcEnLQ>" (2) Univerzita Karlova v Praze *iForum* headlines and posts such as "Charles University Researcher Receives a Prestigious European Grant" or (3) the iHull – the University of Hull Institute for Creativity and Innovation's announcement of a "funded social media training programme" that includes courses covering "LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and other social media activities such as podcasting, creating a video for your business and blogging with Word Press."

Similar positive uses of social media could be culled worldwide – including these examples from the U.S.: (1) Bloomberg School of Public Health (@JohnsHopkinsSPH) receives \$38.6 mill for orthopedic trauma research. <http://bit.ly/bNPLXy>; (2) the “First 100 Days” blog of Sally Blount, new dean of the Kellogg School of Business at Northwestern University; or (3) the Harvard University Facebook page, linking to YouTube to “see what Harvard is doing in the world of microrobotics or to iTunes to “listen to Yo-Yo Ma perform Bach’s First Suite for Solo Cello.”

Assumption #3

The vision, knowledge and experience necessary to build a productive social media PR presence are largely transferable to reputation management initiatives at our university.

Explanation

While the search committee has no specific timetable in mind, we expect the Multi-PR Linguist will also contribute to marketing, advertising and other efforts. Since the extent will depend upon future developments and performance, the search committee will not explore Assumption #3 in detail. However, we are confident about career growth potential for the Multi-PR Linguist, based upon extensive news coverage in Europe, the U.S. and elsewhere that speaks directly to the increasing role of public relations in overall marketing strategy.

Internationally recognized advertising columnist Stuart Elliott recently noted this trend in *The New York Times*, describing the “growing recognition along Madison Avenue of how much more interested marketers are becoming in using public relations to reach consumers.” He quoted Miles S. Nadal, chairman and chief executive at MDC, an advertising industry holding company operating in the Americas and Europe, regarding how PR firms excel at “understanding the changing dynamics of the marketplace... We love the PR space – social, blogging, crisis management, events.”

A similar integrated communications approach -- in full partnership with our public relations team -- will be necessary to achieve our university’s future objectives. We expect that the leadership of our incoming Multi-PR Linguist will be particularly relevant given the challenges of the European and global economies and as the Bologna Process likely ushers in a new era of student mobility and a greater emphasis on lifelong learning.

Those interested in applying for the position of Multi-PR Linguist should e-mail a curriculum vitae and an explanatory cover letter to the search committee within 30 days of the publication date of this announcement.

