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Fresh Ideas? Head Back to School

Some Old-Fashioned Research Could Bring in New Talent and Opportunities

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

Every spring, I head down to my alma mater, Ball State University, to serve as guest lecturer. My time in Muncie, Ind., is generally invested in bringing real-world experience into the classroom. The exercise gives students the opportunity to absorb a different perspective and ask questions.

The trips are an opportunity to give back, reconnect with friends on the faculty, get a sense of the expertise students will bring to the market and hear about how the university is evolving to provide new learning opportunities. My trip this year underscored how well many universities, including Ball State, not only are rising to the challenge of providing students with a cutting-edge education, but also providing media planners with a pool of fresh talent; fresh knowledge; partnership opportunities; and the chance to learn through interaction with students.

Many high-quality universities might provide these resource opportunities. Traditional leaders in the collegiate advertising and media space are the University of Texas, Michigan State, Northwestern and the University of Illinois. A university like Ball State is building its reputation, but it provides good examples of resources media planners could utilize.

Fresh Talent

Ball State has evolved over the last 15 years, positioning itself as a top-notch communications learning institution. Through its College of Communications, Information & Media, Ball State's Department of Journalism has enjoyed much recent success in the American Advertising Federation's National Student Advertising Competition. The last three years have seen the BSU team win the AAF's regional competition and head on to the national level.

What that accomplishment means for media planners is talent. Students are primarily responsible for creating campaign solutions required for the competition. Those solutions require solid, innovative advertising ideas as well as creative media problem-solving. Considering as well the depth of teamwork and presentation skills needed to be successful in the competition, media planning professionals can confidently look at AAF competition students as very high-caliber employment prospects.

In order to fulfill their profitability as stand-alone organizations, media companies must carefully manage costs. From a staffing perspective, that may mean relying on a paradigm of quality young talent working with seasoned professionals to service client needs. Many companies might invest no effort in recruiting talent,

simply selecting from the best that walks through their door.

When clear leaders can be identified, either in university leaders like Texas, Northwestern or emerging campuses like Ball State, or in AAF competition finalists, why not invest some effort in targeting those prospects? If your organization hasn't recently taken a critical look at recruiting talent, it might be a profitable activity to start soon. A thoughtful Web search or scanning recent industry press can provide a good indication of where the best sources of quality talent might be found.

Fresh Knowledge

As at many universities, BSU's journalism department includes a quality mix of academics and ex-industry professionals who bring relevant knowledge into the classroom, preparing students for a future in the advertising business. Not only does the faculty provide solid instruction, many also serve as AAF competition mentors and still do research in their own right. Quick perusal of any university's Web-site can quickly tap a planner into the research conducted by faculty professionals.

BSU's site, as do others, offers faculty profiles that lead to biographies, academic credentials and extensive lists of published research and papers. If you are a planner searching for information, it is fairly easy to identify the faculty on staff responsible for media planning classes and tap into their published work. Sometimes the research is directly available on the site. But at the least, more than enough information is available to take a couple of quick notes and subsequently obtain a desired piece via Web search.

Academic research may not be familiar, so if you haven't invested much time in searching academic pieces for information that can be valuable in planning, here are a couple of things to keep in mind.

First, there's a lot more to find in any academic piece than a tedious title might imply. Read the article before passing judgment based on a title.

Second, there are other valuable gems to be found in articles outside of the body of the piece, namely in the references section. Let's say you've found a fairly informative research piece but are looking for more information. Don't forget to read through the references listed at the conclusion of the piece.

For example, one of my BSU contacts is Bob Gustafson, an ex-agency pro who teaches campaign classes. In his bio section on the site, the most recent article he's published (with Tom Robinson and Mark Popovich) dealt with negative stereotypes of older consumers in advertising and was picked up by the prestigious Cambridge University Press. It includes 44 references to similar or supporting pieces of work. That's fairly typical.

Academic articles may be unfamiliar, but they can pay big dividends. One good university research article can open the door for a planner to a wealth of additional information.

Partnership Opportunities

Universities also can provide vital and useful partnerships. Within the three-building complex at Ball State that includes the new \$21 million David Letterman Communication and Media Building is the Center for Media Design (CMD). The CMD often has been in the news in recent years, reflecting the many interesting things going on there.

For starters, the college's mission is to help industry partners produce marketable digital products. To

accomplish this mission, the CMD has created a digital "Middletown" center very much in the same spirit as the "Middletown" image Muncie, Ind., enjoyed for many years. Muncie became known as a reflection of middle America when it was featured in the six-part 1982 PBS documentary series "Middletown," which explored life in an average American town. The focus of digital Middletown is on testing and evaluation of digital product and media offerings.

Centerpieces of CMD's efforts that have attracted significant attention are the Middletown 1 and 2 studies, which tracked 500 individuals through their days. Rather than using the typical phone call or survey methodology, the studies relied on personal shadowing of participants by researchers who recorded media contact points, life activities and locations throughout the day. No cobbling together an assumptive portrait here; the Middletown studies paint a real day-in-the-life picture.

Nielsen announced in February that it has contracted with the CMD to provide insights into how consumer media behavior flows to, from and between television, the Internet and mobile media. Nielsen's hope is to find better ways of measurement that reflect evolving consumer behaviors. The announcement ironically came on the same day Nielsen announced the termination of Project Apollo, the media measurement initiative in which it was partnered with Arbitron.

Ball State is not the only university that can serve as a valuable research ally. Among many offerings, the University of Texas has the Office of Survey Research (OSR). The OSR can field customized research, questionnaire design, sampling, statistical analysis and more. They are experienced at creating and executing a research plan and may be a perfect partner to help a media unit obtain valuable insight from consumers.

As is demonstrated by Ball State's CMD, via its Middletown studies, and Texas, with offerings like the OSR, universities can help planners find consumer insight valuable to media planning. With on-the-ground experience in place, universities can be just the partner media planners need to turn up useful information for their brands.

Interacting With Students

Reconnecting with universities also can provide planners with opportunities to practice their skills. Maybe you're a planner who doesn't enjoy many opportunities to present to clients. Visiting a campus and presenting to a class or two can help keep your presentation skills vital. There's also the skill of thinking on your feet. If you've ever presented in front of college students, you'll be surprised by some of the questions they ask. There are always questions asked you won't expect. Learning how to react on the fly is a vital skill to have when presenting to clients.

Another idea is to reverse the situation. Have you ever invited college students to present to your organization? Provide students with a challenge and have them come to you. Beyond the potential benefits of having the students' perspective give the media team fresh ideas for solving media problems, there's the advantage of learning how to positively critique and mentor others' work. That's not an easy skill to learn, but it's a valuable one for media supervisors to have in order to get the most from their team.

When was the last time you reconnected with your alma mater? If you haven't visited in a while, it might be a good idea to do so. There are many benefits that may be reaped by rekindling a relationship. New talent, partnerships and knowledge are valuable resources media planners can obtain from a college or university long after they receive their diplomas.

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