PRSSA

2024–2025

Student-run Firm Handbook

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Student-run Firms play a key part in guiding our members along the road to professional development. While our organization evolves each and every day alongside our industry, Student-run Firms serve as a vital component to our members' success. Student-run Firms continue to supply our members with exceptional experience and our clients with innovative ideas.

This handbook serves as a resource to help guide your Student-run Firm in the most effective way possible, including suggestions for firm organization, workflow, client relations and more. Student-run Firms come in many shapes and sizes, which provides our organization with many unique perspectives and experiences. Refer to this handbook for ideas on how to establish and maintain your Student-run firm. These tools and resources are here to help your firm achieve the highest level of professionalism, the most ideal organizational structure and open communication strategies that will help your firm to receive or maintain its National Affiliation.

Nationally Affiliated firms represent the most distinguished and successful Student-run Firms. Achieving this status provides your firm access to PRSSA's client referral system, the ability to apply for Student-run Firm Awards and the potential first access to participate in new opportunities. The tools found in this guide will help your firm achieve the National Affiliation standards if you so choose. Every firm is encouraged, no matter what size or background, to apply for National Affiliation. The application for National Affiliation and information on Student-run Firm Awards can be found on the PRSSA website.

If you have questions or need guidance throughout the process, please reach out vpprofessionaldev@prsa.org.

What Is a Student-run Firm?

A PRSSA Student-run Firm is an operational public relations firm managed by PRSSA members. Firms allow students to gain hands-on experience with business-to-client relationships.

The advantages of participating in a firm include the following:

- Building client relationships and meeting professionals.
- Learning how to lead and work as a team.
- Creating résumé/portfolio material.
- Getting hands-on public relations experience.
- Developing PRSSA Chapter unity.
- Learning to balance tasks and handle numerous duties.
- Applying theories learned in the classroom.

Starting a Student-run Firm can be a daunting endeavor. As you consider your first steps, know that not everything will be perfect and learning is part of the process. Running a Student-run Firm requires a committed team, willing to work hard.

When launching a Student-run firm, keep the following principles in mind:

- **Plan ahead.** Build governing documents and policy forms before launching a firm. You can always go back and edit these documents, but planning out the structure ahead of time will set your firm up for success.
- **Start small.** While you might have plenty of interest in the firm, it is easier to manage and learn from mistakes with a small group of clients and employees. 2–4 clients and 10–20 people is a good place to start.
- **Research and choose your advisers carefully.** These advisers should serve as mentors and resources for your firm. They are there to help guide the firm to success but should not be responsible for leadership obligations. You are also allowed to renew your adviser, if needed.
- **When working with clients, confirm everything in writing.** Maintaining contracts is an important way to align the firm's and client's goals and expectations.
- **Know what public relations is and help your clients understand it too.** Public relations isn't necessarily putting up fliers, passing out coupons or making a Twitter account. Be strategic so your firm gets as much out of the relationship as your client does.
- **Set a professional atmosphere** so your employees will take the firm seriously. It's easier to maintain a professional setting from the start than to try to regain one after it has been lost.
- **Build relationships** with faculty members and your local PRSA Chapter to have as resources and partners in future opportunities.

Build Your Team

When choosing executives, always pick committed individuals with whom you can effectively manage a firm.

Though Student-run Firms are organized within a PRSSA Chapter, they require their own student administrators to support their initiatives. Firms must have effective leaders to ensure stability and longevity. A small Student-run Firm may choose to have only a firm director, an assistant firm director and an account supervisor and three to four account executives per client; whereas, a larger firm may have a full board of officers. The positions and titles should accommodate the needs and numbers of your firm staff. Remember to make sure your structure meets the standards set forth for National Affiliation if your firm wishes to apply for the designation (see section on National Affiliation).

PRSSA recommends the following positions (multiple members may hold one position, if appropriate):

- Firm Director
- Assistant Firm Director
- Department Director(s)
- Account Executives
- Public Relations Director
- Administrative Assistant
- Finance Director
- Staff Members

Depending on the size and structure of your firm, you may require more, fewer or some combination of these positions. National Affiliation standards recommend you have at least one firm director and two assistant directors.

Firm Director

The Firm Director is responsible for managing the firm's operations and serves on the Chapter's PRSSA Executive Board to maintain communication between the firm and the Chapter. The Firm Director should have regularly scheduled meetings with staff and weekly meetings with officers. Duties may include the following:

- Evaluate and motivate firm members.
- Select account executives with the help of the Assistant Firm Director.
- Maintain on-going contact with the firm, Faculty and Professional Advisers.
- Conduct leadership and general firm meetings.
- Maintain documentation of all activities.
- Oversee client search and acquisition.
- Establish communication between the firm and the rest of the Chapter.
- Maintain contact with clients and account executives to ensure satisfactory progress.
- Offer commitment and professionalism to the firm and its activities.

Assistant Firm Director

The Assistant Firm Director plays an important role in helping the director oversee the firm's leadership and relationships. Duties may include the following:

- Assist director on all projects and activity planning.
- Supervise all accounts and maintain file of activities.
- Recruit and maintain clientele.
- Assist, advise and evaluate executives during meetings and report to firm director.
- Perform director's duties in their absence.

Internal Communications Director

An Internal Communications Director is responsible for ensuring the quality level of all firm projects and overseeing the students in the firm. If your agency is large, it is wise to categorize students by the work they produce and then assign them to projects as they come, rather than assigning them to participate on a certain client team. Duties may include the following:

- Assign students to client projects based on experience and expertise.
- Provide constructive criticism and mentor students in the department.
- Maintain regular communication with Account Executives.
- Regularly meet with students to review their work.
- Provide final approval on projects prior to delivery to the client.

Account Executive

Account Executives are often the main client contact. The account executive must be professional, responsible and ethical because they represent the firm. National Affiliation standards recommend a firm should have at least two account executives. Account executives should report consistently to the firm's executive board through written and oral reports. This ensures that the client is well-served and that all associates are participating. Duties may include the following:

- Develop goals and objectives with your account members.
- Obtain client permission to implement tactics.
- Uphold consistent communication with account members through phone calls and email reminders.
- Maintain regular communication with the client.
- Complete a detailed weekly activities report.
- Maintain a continuous and complete file of activities and completed projects.

Public Relations Director

The Public Relations Director builds relationships and support for the firm among its key audiences. Duties may include the following:

- Create a publicity committee to promote the firm and motivate others to join.
- Maintain and develop social media channels for the firm.
- Disseminate news to local media about upcoming and successful client events.
- Assist firm director to creatively recognize achievements for firm members.
- Research and implement volunteer events and donation opportunities for the firm.

Finance Director

The Finance Director keeps accurate, updated expense records and ensures adequate funds are available for campaigns. The Finance Director is strongly encouraged to work with an Adviser to reduce liability. Duties may include the following:

- Assist firm director in preparing annual plans, budgets, proposals and histories.
- Ensure appropriate resources are available for account executives.
- Research, design and implement fundraising.

Staff Members

Fill these positions with PRSSA members first, then solicit the service of student freelancers, consultants or accountants. Staff members are responsible for maximizing their own experience, under the direction of the account executives. Duties may include the following:

- Submit regular report forms to account executives.
- Actively participate in account activities.

Officer Training

You must train your team in the firm's operations and procedures. This is best to do in the beginning of each term or rotation of firm leadership to maintain consistency. Training can be as simple as holding officer meetings, providing a handbook or hosting a retreat. Your Advisers may assist. This does not have to be limited to one meeting or event. Leaders should be actively considering predecessors and uplifting potential candidates throughout the term. This will aid in a smooth transition. The firm should also send at least one firm representative to the PRSSA International Conference each year for networking and professional development. Public relations skills that can be practiced in your firm include:

- **Research —** Focus groups, surveying, evaluation techniques, interviewing
- **Business —** Budgeting, proposals, presentations, management function
- **Media relations —** News releases, press kits, media pitching, radio and television spots
- **Design —** Publicity (newsletters, brochures), photography, special, desktop publishing
- **Writing —** Feature stories, op-ed pieces, speech writing, strategic plans
- **Web development —** Copy design, graphics design, forms handling
- **Event planning —** Fundraising, campaign planning, goal setting, multi-tasking
- **Social Media —** Analytics, content design, visual optimization, engagement

Good Management Practices

Management involves planning, setting goals and making decisions. Officers are responsible for the business and influence its success. Management encompasses the following:

- **Planning —** Setting the goals and strategies for your firm.
- **Organizing —** Deciding on tasks, delegating, scheduling, etc.
- **Staffing —** Hiring, training and terminating (if necessary) employees.
- **Directing —** Supervising and motivating employees.
- **Evaluating —** Reviewing how you are achieving your goals and reacting accordingly.

Recruiting members

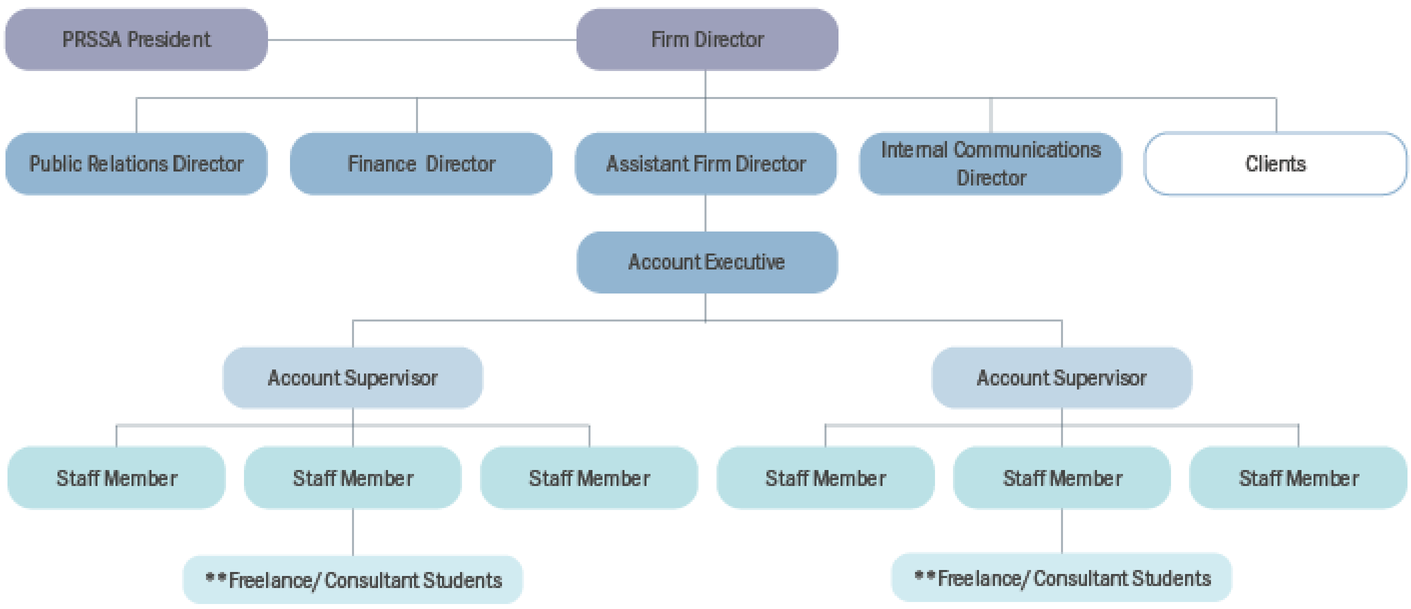
Seek publicity to recruit new members. Modes of publicizing include the following:

- Create a Firm newsletter or regular spot in the Chapter newsletter.
- Send a press release or pitch to the school newspaper.
- Develop fliers to post around campus or give out at special events.
- Start a publicity committee or offer the firm as a class for credit.
- Invite public relations students to an opening social event, such as a barbecue.
- Create awards for students who demonstrate an outstanding effort in the firm.
- Announce the firm in public relations and business classes.
- Feature a link to the firm website on the Chapter website.
- Create a social media campaign.
- Talk to professors and announce in relevant classes.

Structure

Organization Chart

Firms should have a documented structure, similar to a professional firm's, to guide all organizational activities. The structure should accommodate each firm's resources and circumstances. The following is a sample organization chart for a Student-run firm.



***A student who provides short-term specialty advice on a campaign or project.*

Name

Whether you choose a name that is simple or associated with your college, make sure it will grow with your firm. Involve all firm members in brainstorming and choosing. A good firm name is easy to remember, distinctive, professional and indicates your business.

Logo and Tagline

The logo and tagline should be carefully developed symbols of your business. See examples from Rutgers (Scarlet PR), University of Florida (Alpha PRoductions), Universidad de San Martìn de Porres (Firma PR) and Syracuse (Hill Communications).

Mission Statement

A mission statement clarifies the firm's goals, sets expectations for its members and shows clients you are organized and focused. Good mission statements are brief and memorable.

The following are example mission statements:

- "To provide public relations counsel and strategic communications services that enables our clients to build strong relationships and to influence attitudes and behaviors in a complex world."
- "We undertake our mission through convergence by integrating specialist knowledge of practices and industries, local market understanding, proprietary methodology and breakthrough creativity."
- "We are dedicated to building long-term, rewarding partnerships that add value to our clients and our people."
- "Our clients are leaders in their fields who are initiating change and seeking new solutions."

Vision

One of your first and most important decisions is when responsibility of the firm will transition to new leaders. To make this decision, firm leaders should review the National Affiliation standards and envision how the firm will operate after it has met each standard. Set semester and year-long goals and let the goals dictate when leadership changes.

Goals

Have an organized strategic plan with research, action, communication and evaluation sections. Periodically re-evaluate goals with your Faculty and Professional Advisers. Goals help indicate if your firm is valuable to staff and clients. They provide a focus for officers, whose goals and projects should complement. The following are example goals:

- Increase firm [membership or clients] by [quantity] during [semester, year, etc.].
- Create a firm portfolio or sample press kit by [date].
- Increase awareness of our firm by [percent] compared to last year's awareness survey.
- Gain National Affiliation by [semester, year, etc.].

Objectives

Objectives for a new firm may include establishing strong leadership, obtaining clients, developing a strong network and increasing membership. When setting objectives, consider the demands on the firm and how the firm can benefit current and future members.

Policies

Specific policies are necessary for crisis and problem resolution. All members should receive a copy of the firm policies. Consider including the following:

Conduct

- Behavior policy and dress code
- Customer relations policy
- Conflicts of interest policy
- Confidentiality policy
- PRSA/PRSSA Code of Ethics
- Dispute resolution policy
- Travel and automobile usage policy
- Community participation policy

Personnel Responsibilities

- Employment agreements
- Orientation and training
- Hiring and firing policy
- Personnel records policy
- Pay and reimbursement policies
- Equal Employment Opportunity policy
- Suggestion policy
- Employee relations policy

Firm Operations

Firm Activities

- Officers should conduct regular meetings with all staff.
- Account executives should meet regularly with account staff.
- Hold workshops to help members learn about topics not discussed in classes.
- Hold regularly scheduled client meetings or calls and distribute minutes.
- Complete all client services as promised and submit regular client reports.
- Allow clients to evaluate the firm annually.

As The Firm Grows

- Grow your brand as a professional organization through social media. Visualize your work for potential clients.
- Offer a brochure or connect through social media with local businesses, restaurants and shops.
- Develop and practice a presentation to give to potential clients.
- Establish billing rates and methods.
- Apply for National Affiliation when requirements are met.

Interviewing Potential Firm Members

- Sincerely welcome every applicant. Be enthusiastic and friendly.
- Share your commitment to the firm and the benefits of participating.
- Ask about the applicants' experience, expectations and commitments.
- Have a rubric to ensure objectivity.

Business Pitfalls

You can avoid many of the following pitfalls by planning ahead and seeking help:

- Incomplete records
- No marketing strategy
- Poor management
- Miscommunication
- Hiring the wrong people
- Poor customer service
- Unwilling to ask for help
- Client dissatisfaction

Proper Records

Records are the most important management tool you possess and ensure future members' success. Keep your records simple. Track the following information:

- Inventory
- Client contacts
- Petty cash and payroll
- Suppliers
- Employee data
- Mileage
- Telephone calls
- Accounts payable and invoices

Recruiting Clients

Research possible clients that need the type of work you want to do. If your campus is not near a large community, look within your school for possible clients.

- Visit campus organizations.
- Promote at campus events.
- Distribute brochures and fliers.
- Contact new local businesses.
- Announce the firm at a PRSA meeting.
- Advertise in a PRSA Chapter newsletter.
- Contact previous employers.
- Volunteer or fundraise for a nonprofit.

Once you have a list of potential clients, send a personalized letter to each of them introducing the firm. Follow up with a call to arrange a meeting to present a proposal and contract.

Managing Contracts and Campaigns

Contracts

Contracts are vital to your Student-run Firm. A contract aligns your expectations and abilities with those of the client and provides documentation of the conditions of your work. See the sample contract at the end of this handbook. Your contract should include the following:

- Client's list of anticipated projects including priorities and tentative schedule.
- Conditions of accepting new projects not listed on original contract.
- Times like finals and holiday breaks that will affect productivity of firm members.
- Minimum amount of work or projects to deter inactive clients (when necessary).
- Billing information and conditions, including out-of-pocket expenses.
- Conditions for termination and canceled projects.
- Conditions of keeping samples of printed or published work as portfolio samples.

Campaigns

A successful public relations campaign starts with understanding your client's needs. Campaign planning includes the following:

- Research your client, the opportunity or problem and your audiences.
- Determine objectives with a focus on impact and output.
- Plan your theme, actions, media targets and what constitutes effective communication.
- Evaluate the impact and output of your objectives.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a creative group problem-solving technique. Members may suggest any solution to a problem. The following tips will help you run a group brainstorming session:

- Define your problem clearly.
- Define the criteria of success.
- Stay focused.
- Don't stay on one idea too long.
- Encourage everyone to contribute.
- Allow criticism. It increases creativity.
- Appoint one person to take notes.
- Let people have fun.

First Client Meeting

Prepare for client meetings by writing an agenda. Be sure to ask the following:

- What are the client's needs?
- What are the client's goals?
- What are your goals?
- What do their competitors offer?
- What is their budget?
- Do their needs match your services?
- What have they done in the past?
- Does the client understand the contract?
- Who is the client contact?
- What is the timeframe?

Discuss and agree upon your evaluation of "good public relations." How do you want to evaluate the outcome? Manage the client's expectations up front, before any work begins. All expectations should be documented within the client contract.

Developing a Business Network

Effective business networking provides you and your firm with relationships that could become new clients. Remember that networking should be based in a genuine interest in helping others. Friends and supporters are just as important in business as they are in your personal life. They will educate and guide you. Your network should include the following people:

- Community leaders
- Business owners
- Campus administration
- PRSSA alumni and PRSA members
- Champions for PRSSA
- College/University faculty and staff

Pro-Bono Professional Development

When starting your firm, finding clients willing to pay for your services may be difficult. Pro-bono work is a great way to build your firm portfolio and attract larger clients. Additionally, pro-bono work unites firm members around a meaningful cause and assists your firm's reputation. Even if your firm is well-established, pro-bono work is a great way to implement new campaigns, explore another sector of public relations and discover causes you are passionate about.

Pro-bono work is done for free. You may consider working for local nonprofits. By presenting strategies to increase their donor or volunteer base, you will add to your portfolio, execute a successful campaign and earn an invaluable client recommendation. Before you begin pro-bono work, be sure the client understands that your work extends beyond casual volunteer duties.

When choosing a client to assist, consider what you want to accomplish. Perform a strength, weakness, opportunity and threat (SWOT) analysis for the organization to guide your campaign planning. If you are already familiar with the organization's needs, they will be more confident in your counsel. Discuss your ideas for them and if they consent, you have your first client.

Use the guidelines found in this handbook for your pro-bono client, as for any other client. Remember that your initial clients are your best advocates when securing new business.

Strong Support System

Every firm needs a strong support system, so secure advisers as soon as possible. National Affiliation requires firms to have at minimum a Faculty Adviser and Professional Adviser. Other advisers may include the following:

- Community leaders
- Other business professionals
- Alumni
- Champions for PRSSA
- PRSA Chapter members
- Other faculty

While advisers' first responsibility is to uphold the firm's quality, they should attend meetings and counsel the firm leaders on clients, recruitment, projects, finances, contracts and evaluations. The adviser should be familiar with clients and staff.

Connecting with Your Chapter

While a Student-run firm and a PRSSA Chapter are separate operations, a strong and mutually beneficial connection should be maintained between both groups. Ideally, an overlap should exist between Chapter members and firm members. To improve your firm's connection with your school's PRSSA Chapter, consider implementing the following:

- Invite all Chapter members to attend a firm status meeting or workshop.
- Provide firm updates and announcements at E-Board meetings.
- Foster collaboration on National initiatives.
- Encourage Chapter members to support the firm by sharing its goals, such as gaining National Affiliation.
- Encourage/require firm's attendance at PRSSA meetings/events.
- Schedule a retreat or bonding experience.

These are not required of the firm but will help to ensure a successful relationship. This relationship will also be reviewed in any application for National-Afiiliation, so it is crucial to foster a good connection early on.

Finances

A firm's finances can be handled internally or by a financial manager but either way, record keeping is vital. Records to maintain include the following:

- Inventory Log
- Accounts Receivable and Payable
- Payroll Log
- Telephone Log
- Weekly Income/Sales Journal
- Mileage, Travel & Entertainment Log

A paper record keeping system may work for a small firm but eventually you may need computer software. A large firm may need to hire a fiscal manager to handle invoices, receipts, time cards and taxes. To avoid ethical problems, require signatures from your firm director and Faculty Adviser and release funds to only one designated person.

Billing

Determine if and how much you are going to charge clients. Many Student-run Firms don't charge until they gain experience. Check if your school's campus regulations allow you to charge. Clients will pay for quality work. Your fees may vary if the client is a nonprofit or depending on the experience of firm members. You may want to base your hourly rate on what local interns earn. The firm officers, counseled by advisers, should make billing decisions.

To gain experience with billing, consider "fake billing." Prepare an invoice clearly marked "NO CHARGE." Include all information that would be listed on an actual invoice.

All fees must be stated in the contract. When setting prices, consider your operation costs, what the competition is charging and research into market standards. The following are three common methods of charging clients for firm services:

- **Retainer Fee —** A fixed fee for unlimited services over a period of time.
- **Special Project Fee —** A fee charged per service or product provided.
- **Hourly Billing —** A fee charged per hour worked. Your contract should include a predetermined monthly minimum and maximum. The firm is responsible to deliver its services within that range. Include a list of accomplished tasks in the invoice.

The financial manager is responsible for keeping an accurate budget and financial record. You also need to determine how firm income will be used. Often, it should be used to expand and improve the firm, rather than being directed for general Chapter use.

Proposal

The firm and client should agree on a proposal before any work is performed. The proposal should list the services you'll provide, supplies needed, reimbursable costs and client fees. If additional services are requested, draft a separate contract to prevent misunderstandings.

Corporate Sponsorship

Many times, companies looking to benefit their communities will donate funds to hire you for a nonprofit. Be sure to examine the criteria and terms when applying for these grants.

Transitioning from Pro-Bono to Billing System

As mentioned previously, Pro-Bono clients provide some of the best opportunities for your firm. However, these clients may not want to transition into a billing system. To ease this process, make sure that your firm is providing quality and competitive work. Ask your advisers, alumni, and PRSSA Chapter to review portfolios for your clients. Another great way to pitch a billing system is to evaluate the client's portfolio and compare your service fees with local agencies.

If your firm has multiple clients that have agreed to pay for services, do not be afraid to release a Pro-Bono client. If your firm is not as developed, work with the client on other possible payments such as in-kind donations or sponsorships until both parties are ready for that transition.

Evaluation

An effective evaluation process measures the firm's performance and identifies areas of improvement. The evaluation should answer the firm's goals and provide insight for future firm members. Maintaining thorough, accurate records of evaluations is vital. Each firm member should keep a portfolio of all projects for use as an evaluation and employment tool. Clients should complete an evaluation at the end of each semester or project. This feedback will show how the firm could improve and can be used in recruiting future clients.

The Faculty Adviser or firm director should conduct a short interview with each member yearly, though a firm may benefit from having account executives conduct more frequent reviews. This interview should not be extensive but should mimic a professional annual review, focusing on client benefits and results, rather than methods or tactics.

Reports should accommodate the firm's needs. Consistency is vital to ensure the client is well served and all associates are participating. The following are suggested reports a firm should maintain, and samples can be found at the end of this handbook:

- Account Executive Sign-off and Weekly Activity Reports
- General Membership Application, Staff Evaluation and Portfolio
- Client Pitch Letter, Proposal and Contract
- Client Final Report and Evaluation Questionnaire

Your annual report should include a brief description of the year's projects and may include as an addendum, copies of the firm's products. The PRSSA National Annual Report, on www.prssa.org, can be used as a sample.

Conclusion

Recognition and Evaluation

As the academic year comes to a close, recognize and evaluate the individuals who contributed to your firm's success. Hold a final meeting or social to celebrate the firm's accomplishments. Spotlight each account or project and display some of the work. Give awards such as outstanding account coordinator, team or new member. Consider giving all participants a certificate. This motivates members and shows their contribution is valued.

Apply for the Student-run Firm Award for "Best Campaign" or "Best Tactic," or enter PRSSA's Dr. F.H. Teahan Chapter Awards Program in the "Chapter Firm" category, which adds to your credentials and validates your firm's excellence to clients, potential employers and peers.

Appreciation

Thank the clients that provided you work opportunities and the Advisers who helped the firm grow. Send letters of appreciation or consider having a client appreciation social. Maintain contact with clients over the summer months (summer conditions may be part of the contract). Clients need to know when vacations or finals will terminate or temporarily delay work on their projects. Include these dates and times in your firm-client contract.

Questions and Answers

What is a good way for new firms to find new clients?

This is a great place to utilize your Chapter's relationship with your sponsor PRSA Chapter. They can help with networking for potential clients or may even use your firm themselves. You can also search for opportunities within your school with other departments, clubs or organizations. Also, don't be afraid to go to local fairs, markets or events. You never know what you could find.

What if an account group is struggling to communicate with its client?

This can be avoided by having your client sign a communications agreement that outlines points of contact, especially in case of emergency. Choose one point person for the account, usually the account executive, to contact the client and execute this. If the client is difficult to reach by email, proceed to directly calling the client, respectfully. If this is not successful, try to mail a physical letter to the client. If this does not work, assess if it would be appropriate to meet the client in person to schedule a future point of contact. Also, reach out to your advisers throughout this process to assess what actions to take.

How do firm members become familiar with the client?

Staff should research the client and prepare questions for the first meeting. Visit the company if appropriate and if it is a nonprofit, volunteer to help. You may also consider inviting the client to a reception held by the firm.

What should we do if our firm has too many or too few members?

If there are too many members, try to secure more clients or set higher participation criteria. Another idea is to create an in-house team that works on the firm's social media or other internal projects. This will give you certain flexibility since you have control over how many people are needed.

If there are too few members, reduce your number of accounts/projects by not renewing contracts. Recruit new members by pitching your firm to introductory courses in your department. Also, reach out to new departments that could be beneficial in supplying members such as the Business or Finance department. Another possibility is to establish the firm as a class to ensure students will commit for at least for one semester.

What if our members lose interest in our Student-run Firm?

Try securing an exciting account that offers a more diverse experience. Remind students that they can expand their portfolio, gain leadership experience and earn awards. Obtain feedback through surveys and talk to your advisers. To avoid this problem in the first place, ensure that you are utilizing all members of your firm. Don't use the same people repeatedly while leaving others out. If you have a member that is particularly good at something, pair him or her with a less experienced member for a project as a way to facilitate a relationship and encourage participation.

How can we increase attendance at firm meetings?

Send out a survey before the start of the semester to secure the most beneficial time to host a meeting. Then incorporate something fun like a quiz or prizes at all general meetings. Consider making this an on-going competition that will require members' attendance and participation. Increase efforts to build relationships with younger/newer members to build inclusiveness.

If you are starting a firm at a commuter school, explore virtual meetings via Zoom, teleconferences, Skype, Facebook Live, etc. Work with the resources you have to make an effective experience.

How can we increase membership?

Recruiting is usually easiest at the beginning of the semester. Set up an information table at events or talk to communications professors about the firm. Pitch your firm to introductory courses within your department or partner with a faculty member to offer extra-credit opportunities. However, size does not indicate success; members in a small firm may have more ownership and take on more projects.

How do we raise awareness of the firm?

You must know how to market your firm before you can market clients. If awareness is a problem, take on fewer projects and spend more time on building the firm's name and image. Create a website or promotional materials on social media. Further, try to combine your promotional efforts with those of your PRSSA Chapter. Speak to incoming freshmen, share information during related classes and place bookmarks in textbooks prior to the start of the semester in order to keep your firm at the top of students' minds. Visualize your brand through recognizing successes or even members on social media.

Recommended Reading

The following list suggests reading that may assist you in your business dealings. To suggest an addition, contact the Vice President of Professional Development.

- "The Personal Touch" by Terrie Williams
- "The One Minute Manager" by Spencer Johnson, MD and Kenneth Blanchard, Ph.D.
- "Who Moved my Cheese?" by Spencer Johnson, MD
- "The Ultimate Question" by Fred Reichheld
- "The New Rules of Marketing and Public Relations" by David Meerman Scott
- "Pitch, Tweet or Engage on the Street" by Kara Alaimo
- "The Non-Designers Design Book" by Robin Williams
- "Declutter Your Mind: How to Stop Worrying, Relieve Anxiety, and Eliminate Negative Thinking" by S. J. Scott
- "Grit" by Angela Duckworth
- "The 10 Steps of Crisis Communication" by Jonathan Bernstein

Student Case Studies

Case Study One: Grand Valley State University

Problem: Grand Valley State University's School of Communications houses the Advertising and Public Relations program (APR) which consists of 461 students. The APR program is the largest program in the School of Communications and unfortunately became lost amongst the other programs in its class. The foundation of the program was becoming weak and important stake holders were being missed in communication.

Solution Overview: A rebranding was necessary to improve the program which would consist of building a stronger digital presence. The goal of this rebranding was to create a sense of community among the key publics; students, faculty, alumni, and industry professionals. The GrandPR team aided the APR faculty in the process of establishing their brand in multiple ways.

Research: The rebranding began with an immense amount of primary research to fully understand what content students wanted to see from their major program. GrandPR utilized a survey provided by Qualtrics, which consisted of 29 questions and a focus group. The survey questions were divided up into sections; general social media usage, and the APR program social media presence. The questions were designed to gain insight and information on which social media platforms students favored the most. GrandPR was not only interested in APR students but also students of all majors. The results were kept anonymous and the data private to the GrandPR team. Facebook proved to be the winner as 94% of students claimed they use the platform and 69% said they would interact with it pertaining to their major. An interesting find was that 73% of students find information about their major from the Grand Valley website.

The research showed that students would be most interested in content that will help them prepare for their professional endeavors. This can include internship postings, resume builders, workshops, ways to get involved, and current events. All content produced by the APR accounts should not only be interesting to the students, but should also promote the benefits of the content posted. In addition, it is essential to get faculty and professors on board of the promotion of the new APR brand and accounts.

A focus group was conducted by the GrandPR team in order to gain more insight from the students at Grand valley. The questions posed in the focus group provided answers that could be applied to the development of three important elements for building the

APR brand: awareness, attitudes, and action. Participants expressed positive opinions of the APR program's social media accounts and the content that is available. With this information, GrandPR decided to show a different perspective of the APR program by branding it as a service—a program that benefits the students. The program offers valuable information for students which should be readily available to them. The result of the focus group was that it provided GrandPR with essential information to rebrand the APR program. They decided that by using cross promotional tactics, they would be able to increase the amount of their audience that follows them on all platforms. It was also determined that featuring APR professors as a supplement to regular content would be highly beneficial to the students.

Logo Design: It was decided that a new logo was needed to differentiate between the School of Communications and the APR program. The thought behind this logo is that ideas are what tie the professions of advertising and public relations together. All three audiences are "idea people" and that is represented by the light bulb. The new logo is used on most of the samples accompanying this report and was created by the GrandPR Creative Director.

Social Media: Following primary research, the team created the social media platforms that the research stated were the most popular - Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Wordpress. These platforms were then used to reach all of the primary audiences; faculty/staff, APR students, alumni and parents.

Within the first 5 months, the APR Twitter increased impressions by 115.5%, and had 471 followers at the completion of the campaign. November showed the best performance on enLIGHTen, the APR Wordpress blog, which had 786 views and 685 visitors. Within the first 3 months, the APR Facebook page gained 175 likes, and ended the campaign at 223.

Superior Awards: At GVSU, nationally recognized and award-winning programs bring well-deserved accolades to individual students and student teams in the APR program. Now more than ever, APR students are achieving the highest levels of success and celebrating their accomplishments on both local and national levels. Named after the home of the School of Communications, Lake Superior Hall, the Superior Awards have become a way to celebrate and bring light to the exceptional work being created within the APR program. The Superior Awards are not a competition, but rather recognition for superior work throughout all aspects of the APR program and involved coursework. Superior Awards are granted each spring for exemplary student work completed during the past academic year.

The APR program needed another way to connect to their stake holders, in addition to social media. To further connect industry professionals and highlight the outstanding work being done by students, GrandPR hosted the Superior Awards for the APR program for the third year during this campaign. The semester prior to this campaign, GrandPR created the Superior Award logo.

For this event, GrandPR coordinated formal event planning; requested funding, created a budget, arranged speaker gifts, decorated the venue, and arranged catering for the event. The event was deemed a success, thanks to the 14 industry professionals that judged the work, over 35 students submitted work and the 23 students and more than 12 faculty that attended the event.

Challenges: Although there were numerous challenges in designing this plan for the APR program, the GrandPR team championed these issues and prevailed. Reaching the intended audiences posed as a challenge because there are a large amount of students coming from all different backgrounds and at different stages in their education. Thus, the team needed a variety of students for a sample that were somehow tied to the program to get important and relevant information from the primary research. A greater challenge than reaching students, was creating content that catered to the different types of audiences (students, faculty and local professionals) rather than different groups amongst students. Students were the biggest audience and the GrandPR team sometimes felt as if they were alienating faculty and pros because the content was so student - centered. Reaching the right audience would provide the team with the engagement that was required to gain results.

Another significant problem that was overcome was Twitter engagement. The APR accounts became proficient at creating content but often struggled on motivating the audience to engage with the posts (the average Twitter engagement rate was 2.5%). The primary objective of the benchmark focus group was to gain insight on ways that could help boost the engagement of our posts amongst students.

Lastly, requesting a budget from Grand Valley proved to be challenging but was necessary to further the operations and plan for the APR program's Superior Awards. The team had to design a detailed budget plan that would incorporate enough funds to host a successful event. After a detailed budget plan was crafted the team then had to present the budget to the financial board of Grand Valley to be approved.

Outcomes: GrandPR created a major program that stands on its own while also incorporating itself into the GVSU School of Communications. Each of the four social media platforms that were created started at zero followers and ended up having hundreds of followers and gaining tens of thousands of impressions. The connections made between students, faculty and local professionals were demonstrated at the Superior Awards and various social media engagement. With this campaign, the Superior Awards tripled in size, and were the most successful that it had been in the four years that they have been hosted.

This campaign was a year long and is continuing in the coming year. The team recommended revisiting this information and following the analytics of the social media platforms closely so benchmarks can be set and measured against. They also recommended that a survey and focus group be done again later in the campaign to ensure that word is getting out and content is still relevant to the target audience.

Case Study Two: Heritage Ranch Gala

Situation Analysis: Heritage Ranch is a non-profit organization that provides family-style living for children experiencing personal or family crisis. The program allows youth, ages 13-17, to stay on the ranch for an extended amount of time while offering education and counseling. Creating an environment in which family, faith and community values are important, Heritage Ranch focuses on the main goal of family reunification.

In August 2016, Heritage Ranch fell victim to the historic flooding in Louisiana. The ranch experienced heavy damage, and the residents had to be relocated. Due to this unexpected tragedy, Heritage Ranch found themselves in dire need of funds to rebuild their facilities. Every year, the organization hosts a gala to raise money; however, the 2016 gala needed to raise more funds and awareness than ever before. In order to promote as well as execute the event, Heritage Ranch began collaborating with ImPRint in the summer of 2016 to provide social media management, media relations and event execution services.

Research: The ImPRint Communications team began by familiarizing themselves with the Heritage Ranch program. Firm members researched the organization's mission, values and history. Additionally, the team analyzed the Heritage Ranch social media platforms to determine the voice and style used as well as average engagement and traffic on all platforms. They also researched the optimal times and days to post on each platform in order to best reach their target audience. Because none of the team members had ever developed a social media content calendar before, they also researched how to create one.

Planning: Once the research was collected, the ImPRint team began planning a social media calendar containing Facebook and Twitter content for a two week social media campaign to promote the gala as well as three days worth of posts following the event. Based on research collected, the team decided to generate two posts per day: the first posted at 8 a.m. and the second posted at 7 p.m. They also planned which content should be posted each day of the week at both time slots by generating all posts (including text and additional media) prior to the start of the campaign. The team also created a schedule of when the pre-event press release and the post-event press release should be drafted, revised and sent out. Once they completed the content calendar and release schedule, both were submitted to the client for approval.

Execution: On Sept. 3, 2016, the ImPRint team began posting content to social media using the posts directly from the social media content calendar. The team sent the pre-event press release to media on Sept. 5, and 225 Dine Roundup picked up the story. The gala took place on Sept. 16. The ImPRint team arrived early, assisted in setting up the venue, greeted guests, helped guests find their table, worked booths, assisted with the auction and helped clean up. In addition, the team live tweeted the event and posted updates on Facebook throughout the event. They also gathered pictures and quotes to include in the post-event press release, which was sent out Sept. 20.

Results: As a result of the promotional services ImPRint provided, the Heritage Ranch Gala raised record breaking funds of over $150,000 and welcomed over 350 guests. The event gained great media coverage, including a positive story published in the Advocate using the post-event press release. The event not only helped raise money to rebuild the Heritage Ranch facilities, but the gala raised awareness about the program and those affected by the historical 2016 flood. This event as well as the funds and awareness raised were an important beginning to Heritage Ranch's recovery process. In addition, ImPRint Communications has gained a positive reputation through working with this client, and affiliates of the program have requested to work with our firm yet again. Overall, the ImPRint team gained valuable skills for writing, event planning, media relations, social media management, and communication.

Sample Documents

This page lists examples of documents that may be used in your firm. Keep in mind -- these are suggestions for your Student-run firm. Although we are listing these documents, PRSSA or PRSA in no way requires that you use them.

- **Weekly Activity Reports.** This report helps officers measure the successes and failures of their account projects. They also can tell officers if the account executives and individual members are doing their jobs. To fill out the report accurately, an account executive may have their account members report on a weekly basis.
- **General Membership Application.** All staff should receive this form when they join the firm. The form helps with creating account teams with balanced experience. It also allows members to rank projects they would like to work on and consider this when assigning staff and leadership positions in the firm.
- **Staff Evaluation Report.** Account executives complete this report to turn in to the executive board to assist in recognizing, helping or evaluating staff members on their contributions to the firm.
- **Portfolio.** Each member of the firm should keep a portfolio of all the campaign and projects they work on. This can serve a dual purpose. It can be a method to evaluate work performed as well as provide that person a portfolio to use for future employment.
- **Client Evaluation.** Clients complete this report to turn into the firm. This document will help the firm evaluate the services provided to clients throughout the year.
- **Client Contract.** A contract should be read and signed by the client and the firm director, as well as the assigned account executive before any firm/client project begins. Any legal questions or concerns should be addressed before a client is accepted. Make sure both parties have a copy of the contract.

PRSSA National Documents

PRSA Member Code of Ethics. All PRSSA members should practice this code to uphold ethical behavior in their student and professional practice. A copy of this should be distributed and all students and firm members should sign it. Consider reading and discussing it at the first meeting or retreat.

National Affiliation Application. A firm must submit this application to PRSSA Headquarters to become a Nationally Affiliated Student-run Firm, as well as re-submit it every three years to remain Nationally Affiliated.

Student-run Firm Awards. Each year at National Conference, two firms are presented with Best Campaign and Best Tactic awards. This document details eligibility, deadlines and application requirements for these awards.

Recommended Firm Standards

Although firms vary in size and scope, the standards below were designed to help each firm move toward greater professionalism and competency. These standards are minimum requirements and firms are encouraged to exceed them as they are able.

Below are listed the standards that make up each core value of National Affiliation, as well as examples of how a firm can meet these standards. To become Nationally Affiliated, a firm must show that it meets each standard but it does not need to meet the specific examples listed here. For instance, a firm must show that it is PRSSA Centered to become Nationally Affiliated but it does not specifically have to send one member to Conference each year.

Connection

Standard: PRSSA Centered

Examples of how a firm demonstrates this standard:

- All members of the firm's leadership are PRSSA members.
- It is highly recommended that staff members should be involved with the PRSSA Chapter, however it is not required.
- The firm sends at least one individual to the PRSSA National Conference each year.
- Every three years, the firm re-applies to be a PRSSA Nationally Affiliated Student-run Firm by completing the application and sending it to PRSSA Headquarters.

Standard: PRSA Connected

Examples of how a firm demonstrates this standard:

- The firm adviser is an active PRSA member.
- The firm adviser meets with each individual firm members at least once a year to provide direction and counsel regarding the student's professional goals.
- The firm's executive board meets with its PRSA Chapter executive board annually to report on the firm's work. This meeting, in-person or through conferencing, should be attended by a PRSA Chapter executive board member and at least two other PRSA members, as well as a member of the firm's executive board and at least two other account executives. The most important part of the meeting occurs as PRSA provides feedback to the firm.

Standard: Professional and Faculty Support

Examples of how a firm demonstrates this standard:

- Public relations practitioners and faculty members are actively supporting the firm through counseling the firm's management, reviewing the firm's work or providing clients to work with.

Standard: Accountable

Examples of how a firm demonstrates this standard:

- Account executives report consistently to the firm's executive board through written and oral reports. The nature and design of these reports may vary according to each firm's needs. However, the key is to report consistently. This ensures that the client is well served and that all associates are participating (see more under "Outcome-driven").
- Once a year, the adviser to the firm should conduct at least one three-minute interview with each member. This interview does not have to be extensive but it should be similar to an annual review process conducted in business with employees. While some firms may want their account executives to conduct these interviews, it is important for the firm members to have at least one interview — even if it is three-minutes — with the firm director.

- The firm requests that all clients complete some type of questionnaire and return it to the firm at the end of the semester. Each firm may create their own questionnaire that will provide them with the information they need to improve. This will provide feedback to the firm and an opportunity to showcase to future clients those things the firm did well.

Standard: Outcome-driven

Examples of how a firm demonstrates this standard:

- In all written and oral reports, the focus is on the impact made with the client. As time passes, technology will advance causing the means of communication to continually change. For that reason, the review process is designed to measure results rather than methods, strategies or tactics. Students must know how they are affecting real change.
- Program planning systematically uses the research, action, communication and evaluation (RACE) model or a similar system, in meeting the clients' needs.

Standard: Ethically-based

Examples of how a firm demonstrates this standard:

- The firm has a written commitment to follow the PRSA Code of Ethics.
- All members receive basic instruction and sign a commitment to follow the code and behave ethically at all times.
- Any member who is found to be dishonest in his or her reporting to supervisors or clients will be dismissed from the firm.

Standard: Geared toward professional practice

Examples of how a firm demonstrates this standard:

- The firm's executive board provides clear, written expectations and deadlines for the account associates at the beginning of each school semester or term.
- Account associates sign the written expectations at the beginning of each semester or term, certifying their understanding of the firm's expectations.
- The account executives communicate the deadlines they set with their clients to the firm's executive board each semester or term.
- The executive board maintains a database of all the account deadlines and projects. This way, the board can serve the accounts in helping them keep their commitments to the clients.
- Professional conduct dominates the firm's atmosphere; this includes being on time for all meetings with clients and professionals.

Structure

Standard: Organized and structured

Examples of how a firm demonstrates this standard:

- The firm has a documented mission statement to guide all organizational activities.
- The firm has a well-organized and written structure similar to a professional agency (i.e. account executives, account associates, etc.).
- The structure includes, at the minimum, a firm director and two assistant directors. Other positions may include treasurer, public relations director or any other position as needed by the individual firm.
- The firm serves at least three clients, with three students working together to meet each client's needs. This is a minimum standard, but the firm must ensure that at least three students are assigned to each client.
- The firm uses a set of contracts and a defined system of billing for all clients.
- The written structure of the organization has been approved in writing by the adviser and included in the PRSSA three-year review process.

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