

**TEACHING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN
BUSINESS SCHOOLS:
NEW EVIDENCE
FROM THE C-SUITE**

Arthur W. Page

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Business school deans, students and graduates haven't historically appreciated or understood the relevance of strategic communication to corporate, Wall Street, consulting and other post-MBA careers. That view is quickly becoming obsolete.

In this white paper, the Business Schools Workstream of the Arthur W. Page Society drew on relevant research, survey data, insights from business school professors and interviews with top executives to answer a central question: Do business schools need to teach strategic communication? The answer is an unequivocal yes.

Society and the business landscape have changed inexorably. There's an ongoing crisis in corporate trust. Social media have upended the media landscape. Companies must engage in continuing conversations, and it's difficult to recover from damaging events or verbal missteps. The public expects that companies will be transparent, accountable and authentic.

Research shows that a company's reputation can directly impact its financial performance. Particularly at the senior levels, executives must communicate effectively with multiple constituencies, including customers, media, shareholders, employees, regulators and others. Financial performance, communications and reputation are now inextricably entwined.

Benefits for Business Schools

The majority of graduate business schools, however, have not elevated communications to an essential part of their curricula. That is changing, albeit incrementally. Some business

schools have recognized the potential and the benefits of integrating strategic communications, including:

- The ability to meet the high demand from companies and recruiters for MBAs with solid communications skills;
- The opportunity to gain a competitive advantage at a low cost. Schools can build a good program with very little capital investment; and
- A way to eliminate the risk of being left behind as other schools move forward.

It is important to note that the aim of communications education is not to produce the next generation of chief communications officers. The goal is to create an understanding among the next generation of top leaders, including chief financial officers, chief information officers and chief executive officers, about the role, function and power of communications as an executive management tool.

That has certainly proven to be the case for the executives the Page Society interviewed for this project. The goal of the research that led to this new report was to understand what these executives, four of whom have MBA degrees, were observing in their own workforces, what they looked for in new hires and the role communications played in their jobs. Each of the executives

explained that they are intensely involved in communications at their respective companies and believe communications awareness and skills are essential for MBAs throughout their careers.

Those views are underscored by an earlier study commissioned in 2011 by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). The study revealed a huge skills gap and contained a clear message for business school deans: 98 percent of senior U.S. business leaders responded that business schools need to integrate corporate communications and reputation management into the MBA curriculum.¹ Ninety-four percent believe that top management needs additional training in core communications skills.

Tellingly, just 40 percent of the executives surveyed rated their recent MBA hires as “extremely strong” at responding to crisis situations and building and protecting company credibility.

Pilot Program Launched in 2012-13

One of the most significant developments in the gradual evolution of business education has occurred over the past year. During the 2012-13 academic year, five schools participated in a pilot program designed by PRSA to enhance the strategic communications and reputation management education provided to MBA candidates.

With the results of the pilot program forthcoming and a number of other resources available, including an offer from the Arthur W. Page Society to work with deans and business schools on expanding their curricula, it’s a good time to reevaluate what skills and competencies MBAs need to be successful.

MBAs must have the tools and skills to ascend to the top of their professions. How they communicate will not only determine their individual career paths, but also the fate of their companies. With the stakes that high, can forward-looking business schools committed to turning out top-notch grads be far behind the MBA communications revolution?

¹ Public Relations Society of America, “Public Relations Means Business,” Dec. 7, 2011 Survey, <http://www.prsa.org/Intelligence/BusinessCase/MBAInitiative/PublicRelationsMeansBusiness>

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