

The importance of PR internships

You are the product

Find out what Janine Lloyd Owner, PR Expert has to say in this question and answer session about public relations internships in the South African landscape.

What is an internship?

An internship is often a requirement of academic institutes for the completion of a degree or diploma. It provides students with an opportunity to get real work experience in their field of study to complement their theoretical studies. If this is not a requirement of the institute where the student is studying, an internship is a perfect way to get your foot in the door to enter the job market. It gives students a chance to prove that they have what it takes to be future public relations professionals and to get exposure to a wide range of public relations activities that will allow them to hone their career path in the right direction.

How to get an internship?

Be prepared to do some hard work. The internship market is very competitive and the positions available go to the students that stand out and do their homework. Your educational institute should have a list of companies who regularly take interns, so start there. You should also consider becoming a student member of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) as you will get access to industry events and people who will be able to help you.

If a public relations consultancy is your thing, you will want to search Bizcommunity.com for potential job openings and also contact public relations consultancies you feel drawn to by researching the press offices on Bizcommunity. I recommend that you think about what your passion is – if you love entertainment, sport, fashion and IT then find a place where that is the focus of the work the consultancy does. If you lean towards business, find companies who have business and corporate clients. Remember to follow your passion.

From there it is all about your CV/portfolio and your motivation letter. In the industry, written skills are highly important so your CV and motivation letter have to be compelling, well written and free from grammatical errors. You may need to follow up your CV with a phone call so be prepared to sell yourself verbally too.

Before going on an interview, you need to research the company you are potentially going to work for. You need to understand what they do, what their culture is and be

prepared to answer the question “why do you want to work here?” and “why should I hire you?”.

Most employers hire an intern on attitude – after all that is all they have to work with as interns don’t have any experience. They are looking for people who are motivated, proactive and willing to work hard. The public relations industry is so fast paced, students who stand out have a strong work ethic, meet deadlines and are passionate about what they do want to be recognised.

In your motivation, remember to do the following:

- Keep it short and to the point
- Reflect your personality in the language you use
- At the outset say why you want to work at their company
- Then say why you believe they should hire you
- Then pick out two achievements that you believe back up or prove what you have said
- End off with a strong call to action – after all you want them to meet with you

When it comes to your CV:

- Highlight your strengths and achievements
- Include references where possible
- Include examples of any work you may have done during your studies
- Include your passions/hobbies as this tells them more about what type of person you are
- Spell check, grammar check and proofread before you send it out
- Keep it short – three to four pages

What not to do while on an internship:

In my experience, the following affects how I view an intern:

Don’t come in late, leave early or bang off at 5 o’clock – unless transport is an issue. This says you are only there to do your job. People want to hire interns who go above and beyond what is expected.

Ask for help when you need it. If you don’t, it could compromise your work so don’t be afraid to say if you don’t understand something.

Do not sit on Facebook or talk on your phone with friends. If you have nothing to do, be proactive and ask where you can help.

Don't complain if you are given a task you consider beneath you. Everyone starts somewhere so be prepared to wrap gifts, do admin and pitch in wherever it is needed. Prove to the company that you are willing to do what it takes to do the job.

Should interns only focus on one organisation?

I believe that an internship is only valuable if you have a longer-term contract such as six to nine months with one company. This allows you to get breadth and depth of experience in one company so that you understand all the elements of what it takes to be a public relations professional.

Should students be interning without being compensated at all?

My first job was unpaid because I had to prove myself. And I was willing to do it for six months. It is a tough market because there are so many entrants, and sometimes you may have to take an unpaid internship just to get the experience. The standard in the industry seems to be R3500 – R5000 per month. Some companies only offer a transport allowance. Don't make this an issue at your interview – prospective employers want to see how passionate you are to get experience. The more interviews you go on the more opportunities you will have to be able to assess whether you are willing to do an unpaid internship.

What do you have to say about the statement In the UK? [“Tony Blair agreed to pay all his interns after public pressure and a threatened investigation.”](#)

I personally believe interns should be paid a salary. However, I also know how much time and resources it takes to train an intern properly. I also understand when NGOs or smaller consultancies just don't have the funds. The Services SETA and PRISA are working together to see how the industry can facilitate reimbursements from SETA for internships.

What do interns want and are they being met?

Most interns today want to do valuable work where they get to work on top clients and get exposure to exciting campaigns. However, it is not always possible to get this exposure especially as an intern. I promise you that if you work hard and prove that you are dedicated, professional and produce quality work, you will have an opportunity to do more meaningful work.

Virtual internship, does this work or not?

It never works. Interns need guidance and structure as they are just entering the workforce which is a big change from student life. They need to be part of a team, to

understand the bigger picture and be coached as to where they are going wrong or doing well. This can never happen virtually as it requires daily interaction.

In a declining economy how are we managing the influx of new students on an annual basis?

The reality is there are not enough positions to fill the need of public relations students. However, the Public Relations Consultants' Chapter (PRCC) of PRISA is working on a programme to educate the industry on the need for more internships; to provide guidance on internship models; and help with facilitating payment of interns through Services SETA.

As the saying goes... "When leaving, leave on a good note and don't burn your bridges" ...

Remember that everyone you meet on your internship is a referral for you, so keep your relationships positive and do your best to keep your personal reputation intact. It's a small industry and you can't afford to close any doors behind you.