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Learning from Experience: SASAH Communications Intern and Osborne Holdings Intern

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Experiential Learning

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Communication, Value, and Leadership: Learning from Experience

The SASAH Blog was shut down in the fall of 2019. As a result of some technical hiccups beyond our control, the website that Julia, Harsh, and I were supposed to run as blog editors had to be taken down. My first experiential-learning opportunity began with a disappointment. All the work we had put into getting the website ready for the upcoming school year had amounted to nothing. By the time my first experiential-learning placement concluded one year later, however, what began as a disappointment had morphed into an important learning opportunity. Instead of blog editors, we became communication interns running an Instagram page. As communications interns, we learned an important lesson about responsibility.

My second internship began quite differently. Although my second experiential-learning opportunity technically started in the winter of my third year, in my mind it began several months prior to my start date as an intern copywriter at Osborne Holdings. When I first came across copywriting, I was in a state of self-questioning; I was reconsidering what I wanted out of my education and my career. During a time of uncertainty and self-doubt for me, copywriting piqued my interest. Around this same time, I was learning about professionalization in one of my third-year SASAH courses. I decided to put into practice all that I was learning about the job market, and I began looking for copywriting internships.

I learned about more than just managing a social-media page and copywriting during my two experiential-learning placements. I learned what it really means to be a communicator, I

learned where value really comes from, and I learned what it means to be a leader. Even though I am unsure of what my career will look like in ten years, there is one thing that I know to be true: I have value. My degree, my skillset, and my mindset are valuable.

Defining Communication

Communication skills are listed as a desirable trait on nearly every job listing today. I, for one, have had “strong written and verbal communication skills” on my resume since I was fourteen years old. Truthfully, however, I did not understand what it meant to be a communicator when I was fourteen years old. I did not know what it meant to be a communicator when I was eighteen years old, nineteen years old, or twenty years old either. It took me three years of an interdisciplinary arts-and-humanities degree, two internships, and nearly three hundred hours of work experience for me to understand the meaning of the word *communication* and the responsibilities of someone who calls themselves a communicator.

Communication is Not a Unidirectional Process

Oftentimes, communication is understood as the use of writing and speaking skills to represent a company, organisation, or belief. I have learned, however, that this is only a partial definition of the term. When I was a communications intern running the SASAH Instagram page in the early months of the pandemic, I began to understand how limited my definition of communication was. Rather than the expression of information from one party to another, communication is perhaps better understood as the exchange and interplay of information between multiple parties.

When we first began the Instagram page in the fall of 2019, we established two weekly posts. Every Wednesday, we would post an installment of the SASAH Spotlight series. This weekly series would showcase a student project. The rationale behind the SASAH Spotlight

series was that other students on campus and in the program would be interested to see what their peers were working on. We also created Student Feature Friday, a weekly interview with a current SASAH student in which they shared their journey to the program, their academic interests, and their extracurricular activities. For the first several months of the Instagram page, this format was successful.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced classes online and sent students home halfway through the winter semester, though, we began to learn about the other part of communication that extends beyond the showcasing of SASAH students. While we were relying on our old routines with student showcases, the engagement with our posts was declining. Students were less and less interested in joining us for an interview or submitting their projects for showcase. We were operating under the assumption that SASAH students would be just as willing to engage with the page as they were before. It soon became apparent, however, that the needs of our audience had changed.

Our audience was no longer interested in hearing about exciting new projects or learning about a student's path into a particular field of study. In a time of heightened anxiety and social distance, our audience wanted personal connections. Students wanted to hear about what their peers were doing to get through the day. Faculty wanted to see that the students they had built relationships with over the years were still smiling despite facing challenging circumstances. To realize this, we had to do a lot more than just use the Instagram as a channel to share information. We had to stop writing, stop posting, and instead, listen. Then, and only then, were we able to start considering what the role of the Instagram page needed to be at that time.

My time as a SASAH communications intern taught me that a communicator is not just someone who expresses information. A communicator is also, and perhaps even more

importantly, someone who is involved in the exchange of information. A good communicator needs to listen just as much as they speak. Communication is a two-way process.

Communication is Not a Bullet Point on a Resume

With this newfound appreciation for communication, I became interested in copywriting in the fall of 2020. Like many other people over the course of the pandemic, I had become interested in picking up a new skill. When I came across copywriting, I was instantly hooked. I began watching every video and reading every article I could get my hands on. I began learning about sales techniques and search engine optimization. Whenever I was able to steal a moment between assignments and readings, I was writing copy.

Unfortunately, there was one glaring problem with all the copywriting I was doing: my audience was imaginary. There was no one reading my ad. This became more and more apparent to me. I was not writing to real people with real concerns. I wanted to be a copywriter, a communicator of value propositions and calls-to-action, but all I was doing was imposing my concerns and interests on an imaginary audience. Communication cannot be practiced in solitude.

I knew that if I wanted to understand the considerations of a copywriter, then I needed to find some bravery and put my work on the line in front of a real audience. With that revelation, I sat down at my desk; more accurately, I was already sitting down at my desk doing online courses via Zoom in the middle of a global pandemic. I did, however, close my browser and open Microsoft Word on my computer. I decided that I was going to try and sell my first real product to my first real audience.

The product, in this instance, was me. The audience, in this case, was composed of marketing agencies, copywriters, and employers who would consider hiring me as an intern. The

first step was research. I spent hours on LinkedIn, Indeed, and other websites reading through listings for copywriting and marketing interns. I made careful note of the credentials my possible employers were looking for. All the while, one criterion haunted me throughout my search. “Minimum experience: one year,” “minimum experience: two years,” “minimum experience: six months or more at an agency” was attached to just about every job listing I came across. I had no agency experience. In fact, I had no practical experience at all. I had two months of part-time experience writing about fake products to an imaginary audience and the “strong written communication skills” bullet point on my resume was not going to compensate for it. In that moment, I realized that communication skills are not something that can be conveyed with bullet points in the skills section of your resume. If I wanted to be a copywriter, then I needed to show, not say, that I could communicate. Communication can only be demonstrated.

I drafted up a cover letter entitled “Here’s why I don’t like cover letters.” The letter described my objections to cover letters that are jam-packed full of experience and certifications listed in paragraph form. I described how no resume-boosting online certificate could make me right for the job. Only my work ethic, my interest in the field, and my commitment to learning could guarantee that.

Of the near-dozen variations of that cover letter I sent out to employers, only two submissions garnered a response. I interviewed at both companies, and I was offered one position: a copywriting internship at Osborne Holdings. That is the story of how I got my internship with Osborne Holdings, but it is also how I learned that communication is not simply a skill you put on your resume. It is something you must demonstrate.

Defining Value

For me, value has always been a loaded term. As a student, your work is often given value in the form of a letter or percentage mark. You hand in an assignment or write an exam and then you wait nervously for a couple of weeks until you get a grade on it. When that assessment is returned, your eyes go straight to the corner of the page looking for a mark. If the mark is not on the front page, then you flip to the last page of the assessment looking for it. If that too proves to be unfruitful, a frantic hunt for your grade begins as you flip through the pages of the assessment.

Students also tend to think in terms of prerequisites and anti-requisites. To take second-year philosophy, you first must have completed first-year philosophy. You are worthy of second-year courses only once you have completed the necessary first-year courses. Inevitably, when I turned my eye to the job market and began looking for internships, I brought this perspective with me. I would look at job postings for entry-level positions or internship roles, and if I lacked any of the skills or experience listed, then I would take myself out of the running entirely. I would stop myself from applying because I fell short of only one or two requirements. “Once I get some more experience and build up my resume,” I would say, “then I’ll apply.” I soon learned that this mindset, especially as a young person looking to get my first experience in a professional setting, was holding me back far more than my inexperience was.

Your Resume Does Not Make You Valuable; You Make Yourself Valuable

Truth be told: if students and recent graduates only applied to jobs for which they met every criterion on the listing, then hours, days, and months of job hunting would go by without a single application being submitted. No one is a perfect fit for any job listing. An employer takes a chance on every junior employee or intern they hire. Even if a prospective intern has three-resume-pages worth of relevant experience and a LinkedIn page that would put most seasoned

professionals to shame, there are no guarantees. As a young person entering the workforce, your value is not found on your resume. It is found in your intangibles: your work ethic, commitment to learning, and your reliability.

Thankfully, how hard you are willing to work is entirely up to you, how committed you are is your choice, and how reliable you are is a decision you make each time someone calls on you to complete a task or duty at your workplace. As a young person venturing into the world of work for the first time, you are not valuable because you satisfy nine of the ten criteria your employer listed on the job posting. You are valuable because you satisfy six of them, and you are willing to learn and challenge yourself until you fulfill the other four.

Value is Not Something You Can Score

My second experiential-learning placement started when I had my first day with Osborne Holdings in February of 2021. During my first week, Mr. Osborne gave me the run-down on the Osborne Holdings business model, its services, and the value it provides its clients. Then, he gave me my first assignment: cold sales emails. Using all the knowledge I had just gained about the business, I was assigned three emails, each of which were supposed to articulate the value of Osborne Holdings in a different tone.

I spent hours fine-tuning every word that went into those emails, and I presented him with my work at our next meeting. Instead of praising my work, he combed through every line and picked out a handful of worthwhile ideas to explore further. He then asked me to write three additional sales emails leaning into each of those ideas as well as a brief elevator pitch summing up the value of Osborne Holdings. It was an unsettling moment for me. For as long as I could remember, I had a specific grade to aim for. If I scored seventy-five percent on a test, my goal next time was an eighty. Without a grade to guide the valuation of the work I produced, I felt

lost. Stripped of the ability to strive for a perfect score, I instead focused all my efforts on responding to Mr. Osborne's feedback.

When I presented Mr. Osborne with my second set of emails, he was enthused and added them to the Osborne Holdings sales email inventory. When I presented him with the elevator pitch, he posted it to the Osborne Holdings LinkedIn biography on the spot. Even though it was only a biography on a LinkedIn page and one-hundred-and-fifty words worth of email copy, I felt a lot of empowerment in that moment. I delivered value to a real-world business, and I did it without striving for a particular grade. I did it by focusing all my efforts on responding to the feedback of an expert. Instead of being rewarded with a grade, I was rewarded with the knowledge that the work I produced might help Osborne Holdings bring in new clients in the future. From that point on, my entire outlook on my performance and how I valued myself began to shift. When you are a student, it is easy to reduce the value of your work to a letter or percentage grade. In my very first assignment at Osborne Holdings, that mindset was disrupted for the better.

You Receive Feedback in Various Forms, But Only You Can Determine the Value of Your Work

When I submitted those first deliverables at Osborne Holdings, I was met with a flurry of feedback, but none of the feedback ranked my work on a scale. Instead, I was given some suggestions, some criticisms, and some compliments. There was no letter grade for me to hang my value on; I had to discern the overall value of the work for myself based on the feedback I was given.

When I experienced gradeless-ness for the first time at Osborne Holdings, I felt a lot of anxiety. As I progressed through my internship, that anxiety slowly morphed into a sense of liberation. Even though you do get letter grades or percentage marks as a student, they should be

afforded no more power over you than any other piece of feedback. A grade, simply put, is only one small source of feedback amidst dozens of others that you receive on a given assignment or test. It is only one of several tools to help you improve. It does not determine the value of your work, only you can determine that. When I get assignments back now, I no longer look to the mark at the top of the page right away. Instead, I turn my attention to the comments in the margins. That is where learning really happens.

Defining Leadership

For eight weeks, I had the unique privilege of working directly with the founder and leader of Osborne Holdings. During that time, I was not just learning about copywriting but also observing how Oliver Osborne conducted himself as he introduced me to copywriting and mentored me. Leadership, much like communication skills, is one of these concepts which is hard to appreciate until you see it done expertly. I was fortunate enough to learn from an expert at both.

As a young person looking at the professional world from the outside in, it is easy to mistake seniority for leadership. It is easy to look at someone with ten, fifteen, or twenty years of experience in their respective field and call them a leader. However, seniority and leadership are not synonymous. Mr. Osborne showed me that leadership is not simply earned by being the most knowledgeable person in the room, although a seasoned marketing strategist like Oliver Osborne certainly fits that criteria. Leadership is what you do with your expertise.

A Leader is Patient

As I moved forward in my internship, I began to take on more responsibility for the copy that I was producing. When I was given my first assignment with a client, a thought-leader article for the commercial shipping-technology company SparesCNX, I was admittedly

intimidated. I was thoroughly unknowledgeable about shipping technology, but I was supposed to produce a professional article for a real-world company with real sales at stake.

As a good leader does, Mr. Osborne walked me through the process step by step. Before a single word was put to paper, we conducted an extensive client interview. From this interview, there was a transcript that was hundreds of words long. To supplement the transcript, Mr. Osborne directed me to the SparesCNX website to read through the company's communications. Whereas reading the client interview helped me understand the product I was writing about, going through the company's communications helped me understand how I should write about the product. Crucially, none of this knowledge about SparesCNX was handed to me. Instead, Mr. Osborne allowed me to discover it for myself through client interviews and research. Then, after several hours of preparation, I wrote my first word.

When I did finally put words on the page, it was hardly a straightforward writing process. I would work on the article until I reached a logical stopping point, and then Mr. Osborne would go over my work. He would not, however, make any changes on my behalf. He would instead identify any problems in my work and give me feedback. How I responded to that feedback was up to me. If my response failed to solve the problem, then he would simply offer more feedback and give me the opportunity to try out another angle. He offered his support and his expertise but exercised patience in allowing me to troubleshoot my work on my own. A good leader allows those around them to be accountable for their own work. A good leader creates the time and space necessary for growth. Although my name is not listed as the author, the article I wrote for SparesCNX is live on their website today.

A Leader is Generous with Their Expertise

There is very little to question in the matter: Oliver Osborne is a better copywriter than I am. His copy produces more sales than mine does. In the interest of his business, I could have sat on the sidelines, assisted him with research, and helped with search engine optimization while he wrote the copy. That is not what a leader and a mentor does, though. Mr. Osborne put me in the writer's seat. All through my internship, Mr. Osborne never once placed me in a supporting role. I was never given spellcheck responsibilities, and I was never assigned to any administrative work. He always put my learning first and, in some cases, even put it ahead of the business.

Mr. Osborne gave me every possible opportunity to push the envelope and be edgy with my copy. When I pushed a piece a little bit too far, Mr. Osborne offered me his expertise and helped me understand where I had gone wrong. When I was losing sight of the key message of a piece, he helped me refocus it. What is important to note here are the terms "offered me" and "helped me." Above all else, Mr. Osborne was dedicated to my learning. He made it a priority.

A Leader is Selfless

Several months after I had completed my internship with Osborne Holdings, I had taken on a copywriting project on my own. It being my first time handling a client and project on my own, I had some uncertainties. I sent Mr. Osborne a text hoping for some quick advice. He had no obligation to get back to me, and he certainly had no obligation to give me an hour of his time to go through my concerns about the project with him over the phone, but that was exactly what he did. That was when I realized that leadership is not circumstantial; it is not something that you reserve for those under your immediate supervision. Leadership is a commitment to developing those around you that extends far beyond the terms of a contract.

Looking Forward

Coming to the end of my time as a student in the School for Advanced Studies in the Arts and Humanities, I see a lot of uncertainty ahead. I do not know exactly what industry I will work in. In terms of what degrees I will have behind my name or what titles I will have in front of my name in ten years' time, I might as well draw from a hat. There are far too many variables for me to know this. There are, however, some things that I know for certain.

I Want to Be A Communicator

Over the last two years, since I first began as a communications intern and then became an intern copywriter, I have seen the importance of being a communicator first-hand. The importance of effective and reciprocal communication has been made readily apparent by the ongoing debate around masking protocols and vaccine mandates in Canada. It is one of the biggest and most pressing mass communication challenges in recent history. Today's policymakers, public health professionals, and advocates need to be communicators who can read, write, speak, and listen civilly across vast differences of opinion and belief. Communicators have a responsibility to facilitate the exchange of information, especially when it is most challenging to do so. I cannot know exactly what I will do in my career, but I hope that I will take on this responsibility one day myself.

I Want to Be A Leader

When I say that I want to be a leader, I do not mean that I want to be a manager or run a team. Instead, I want to conduct myself as a leader does. I want to be forward-thinking and generous with my time and my expertise. I believe that we, meaning students and professionals, have a responsibility to support those around us and bring the best out of our peers. The future professionals of our society need to be forward-thinking and invested in the whole. For this

reason, I believe that people who are deeply invested in leadership and mentorship are vital to the success of our society.

Seeing great leadership encourages leadership in others. Seeing leaders who put others before themselves, encourages selfless leadership in others. Dr. Aara Suksi, Dr. Barbara Bruce, and others at SASAH are invested in producing students with a passion for leadership. I know this first-hand. Oliver Osborne is similarly invested in producing young professionals of this mindset and skillset. Wherever my career takes me, I hope that I will one day be a leader in my own right.

Looking Forward: The Learning from Experience Webinar

This fall, as I prepared to present my experiential-learning placements to faculty and friends of SASAH, I had the opportunity to reflect on my two internships and my time at Western. I reflected on the challenges that Julia, Harsh, and I faced during our time as a SASAH communications interns. I thought about how we supported each other and anchored each other during a pandemic when everything else felt unstable. I thought about the appreciation we all gained for the responsibility that comes with calling yourself a communicator. I thought about my internship at Osborne Holdings and how rewarding it was to see my writing representing real-world companies. I thought about how I learned to value myself and have confidence in my abilities.

As I presented on my internships, though, I was not so much reflecting as I was looking forward. I watched each of my classmates and friends present: Julia, Harsh, Reese, Denise, Jamie and Evalyn. I saw six young people who are all leaders and communicators in their own rights already. The best word to describe my sentiment in that moment was pride. I felt proud to be a part of SASAH. I felt proud to be a part of this generation of socially conscious individuals who

I know will change the world for the better. My peers remind me each day that we can and should believe in young people. They remind me that we can and should trust in the communicators and leaders of tomorrow.

Communication, Value, and Leadership: Learning from Experience

Before my experiential-learning opportunities, I understood communication, value, and leadership in a very particular light. Before running a university-affiliated social-media account through a pandemic, I thought that communication was just a skill you listed on a resume. I quickly learned that it was something far more complex. As a student, I often equated value to the grade I received on a given assignment or test. As an intern, though, the value of my work had no such measurement. Instead, I had to learn how to focus my efforts on responding to feedback instead of obtaining a particular result. I also learned that leadership is not something earned through seniority. You do not become a leader on account of your expertise. You become a leader on account of what you do with your expertise. With this hard-earned knowledge of communication, value, and leadership to guide me, I am not scared of the uncertainty that comes with graduating this spring. I am embracing it. It is the next step in my journey to becoming a communicator and a leader.

