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Alumni Making Careers in E-Communications

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – E-blast, pay-per-click, tweet, update, blog – all of these are tools of social media marketers, a job that didn't even exist 10 years ago. Now many people, including some Illinois Wesleyan University alumni, are using the Internet and e-communications as an integral part of their careers.

“Honestly, I didn't even know this area existed when I was studying in school,” said Kyle Brigham, a senior search marketing manager at L2T Media in Chicago, an agency that specializes in helping businesses market through online media. Brigham said he planned for a career in media marketing after graduating from Illinois Wesleyan in 2006 with a major in business administration and a minor in music. Though he began as a promotions director for a local radio station, he was soon offered a job with L2T Media, where he assists clients in setting up and managing profiles on Internet-based media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. “I was looking for something big,” he said.

Social media marketing is an expanding field. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a continued growth in public relations, especially with the emergence of social media. Social media sites, like Facebook, boast millions of users, which means millions of people for businesses and organizations to reach.

Sarah Bordson, a 2007 graduate with a double major in English and theatre arts, knew she wanted to work in theatre marketing. After internships at Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago and Berkeley Repertory Theatre in California, she took a job with Chicago Shakespeare Theatre as a marketing associate. After two weeks on the job, her boss called a meeting. “She announced, ‘Well, we've given Sarah a few projects on the website and with e-blasts, and she seems to be picking them up quickly, so that's what she'll be doing from now on.’” said Bordson. “From then on my job focused mainly on e-communications work.” She now works as an e-communications associate for Goodman Theatre in Chicago, where she sends e-blasts (e-mail updates to patrons), maintains the website and monitors the online presence of the theatre.

By the time Stephanie Urban graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in 2008, the field of e-communications was recognized as a career option. “I knew I wanted to do something Internet-based,” said Urban, who is now an online marketing and social media associate for a recruiting firm, The ExeculSearch Group, in New York City.

While at IWU as an international business major, Urban began a fashion blog titled “Because I Said So,” and fell in love with e-communications. “I geared all of my internships to involve online marketing,” she said. Through the Craig C. Hart Career Center, Urban found internships where she could work on websites for a local realtor, a foundation and a software company. “Those internships helped me decide what I wanted to do.” Urban's duties now include posting articles on employment and job statistics on Facebook, Twitter and the firm's blog; managing the company's website content; and training new employees at the firm on social and online media efforts. She also remains close to her first love – managing a fashion blog titled StyleHop.com.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to working in e-communications is keeping up with the constantly changing medium. “You have to keep researching, keep reading to stay on top of the latest trends,” said Urban. “You cannot fall behind.” Brigham notes that challenge is one of the things he loves about the job. “The pros are that it is always changing. There is always something new to learn and there will always be a new way to market,” he said. “Today's great idea might not be tomorrow's great idea.”

Bordson noted that e-communications is doing more than transforming how marketing is done but also giving businesses answers. “The most fascinating thing about e-communications is the ability to gather analytics [or statistics] and analyze them,” she said. “There isn't much wondering anymore about ‘Why did people buy more tickets yesterday than today?’ ‘What shows are they most excited about that we should push for next season?’ We aren't throwing spaghetti at the wall anymore and seeing what sticks.” E-communications is allowing businesses to better determine their next move, she said.

Even though e-communications is a new field, alumni said their time at Illinois Wesleyan gave them the background they needed to tackle the new industry. “I like to credit my current employment to the liberal arts background I received from IWU,” said Bordson, who initially feared taking her “formal reasoning” required credit, until she saw a course that was an introduction to the Web. “I signed up immediately. A few years later, I drew from the information I had learned in that class. My career path unfolded from there,” she said.

Brigham said his marketing classes at Illinois Wesleyan provided a strong base, and his extracurricular activities added to that. “I would say my work as the Entertainment Commissioner in the Student Senate and my work for the Hansen Student Center taught me the importance of marketing and public relations, which helped me to transfer some of my skills into the online space,” he said.

Brigham continues to draw on his Illinois Wesleyan connections. When he knew of job openings at L2T Media, he brought in 2004 graduate John Curtis and 2010 graduate Dave Buesing, whom he found through the Hart Career Center. Curtis said his experience at Illinois Wesleyan taught him “critical thinking over task management. I was more prepared from an ‘outlook perspective’ than a ‘business fundamentals’ perspective,” said Curtis, who is also a senior search marketing manager at L2T Media.

Though the area of e-communications continues to grow and change, Urban said there is an ease and camaraderie between those who work in the field. “It’s a good group of people,” she said. “It’s a new field, so right now it’s easy to connect with one another. Those of us who are involved are very involved, which means we can work together.”

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