

The search



A key factor in Burke's job-search strategy has been focusing on one market: Boston

Joe Burke, a May 2009 graduate of the University of Northern Iowa, shares his trials and triumphs as he seeks his first PR job

I HAD MY PLAN. It was October 2008. The economy was only hinting at the trouble to come. I was making final arrangements for internships with two multinational PR firms in India. It was perfect: I could satisfy my passion for different cultures while riding out the storm, returning safely to the States with unique work experience after the skies had cleared.

Then came February. Both firms informed me that they couldn't cover my living expenses. The cost of my plan suddenly became prohibitive. It hit me like a brick wall: I was focused on the bull's-eye

and suddenly I couldn't identify the target at which to aim. I had no plan and would be fighting for a limited number of jobs against an army of kids just like me. The college-loan play clock was ticking and I panicked. Now what?

I had to get myself under control. It wasn't as if I was an accounting or history major; my degree was in PR, with a minor in marketing. I'd been trained for the past four years to communicate effectively to get attention and influence action. Isn't that how I should define my job search? It began to dawn on me

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that this was nothing more than an extremely challenging PR campaign, one that I had been training four years to execute. It was time to break out the notes and think back to my internships.

The first step was to acquire a new target. I could either spread my job search thinly across the US or focus it in one place. I chose the latter because I didn't like the idea of poor job availability dictating where my next home would be. It also seemed that with a specific target, I could gather specific research, target specific stakeholders, and be more effective overall. As a kid who had grown up in Iowa, but traveled the world, I wanted to live in a bigger city. It wasn't long before my best friend landed a job in Boston. With a ready roommate, only half the equation was missing; Boston would be my new target.

I had to first determine what I was up against, so I did a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis. I began with the PRSA directory and contacted half of the 100 Boston members, including the chapter administrator. They answered questions that only a local pro would know, such as the health of the local job market and strong local specialties. In some cases, they posed questions I'd never considered. It never ceases to amaze me the lengths PR practitioners are willing to go to help out a young professional.

STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

I had to assume that the glut of recent graduates competing for the few jobs out there would follow usual protocol: watch for postings online, send a cover letter and résumé, and wait. Despite confidence in my credentials, I knew that I would be lucky to get noticed by a very bored HR exec reading 20 equally qualified résumés. I had to do the opposite. That executive had to have fun handling my application or at least be intrigued – and since I couldn't be in Boston myself, my delivery had to accomplish that effect. This is when I created www.burkeswork.com. Now I wasn't just a name on a piece of paper. HR

could see my face, read my work, watch videos of me, and follow me on social media. It also saved me loads in postage and encouraged viral distribution.

But the Web site wouldn't sell itself. I still needed direct-mail pieces to compete with loads of paper and electronic applications from other candidates. I began constructing media-kit-style application folders featuring the usual application material. The "application kit" was followed with another mailer to the most promising employers, which featured a Folgers single-serve packet and some copy encouraging employers to "enjoy a cup of Joe with my application." By this time, I had spent a couple hundred dollars and likely had enough shipping experience to work for the post office. I say that only half-jokingly because I realized that by sending out one final piece as a postcard, I could slash my printing and postage expense and reach more than 65 employers with the money saved.

By using Google Analytics, I was not only able to determine that the three mailing pieces more than tripled my Web traffic, but I was also able to see which firms were visiting and the length and frequency of their visits. That information allowed me to focus my efforts toward employers who showed the most interest. More importantly, it showed that I was getting a return on my effort – even if it wasn't a job. Every hit on my Web site was a boost to my morale and told me I was doing something right.

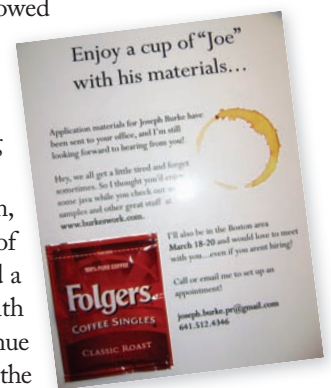
Since then, I spent my Spring Break in Boston, where I had lunch with executives from some of my most promising prospects. I also attended a PRSA meeting where I was able to network with and thank many of the professionals who continue to give me leads and advice. On my flight home, the man sitting next to me happened to be a marketing entrepreneur. He has since become a mentor.

As of writing this, I have yet to find a job, but the small victories thus far give me faith that my efforts will soon pay off. In many ways, I believe I will look back after a long career and view this campaign as one of my proudest. For other recent graduates, I would advise that they think creatively, act boldly, ask for advice from those who know, and be flexible yet determined. Don't give up hope or get lazy. Those who do won't get the job they seek. ●

For updates on Burke's search, visit prweekus.com.

JOE BURKE

graduated from the University of Northern Iowa in May 2009 with a degree in public relations. As of press time, he had planned on moving to Boston in August, where he would continue to seek employment. Burke can be reached via contact information at burkeswork.com.



Burke hopes clever materials, such as those asking employers to "enjoy a cup of Joe," help him stand out