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INTRODUCTION

Jason Morris is the Chief Executive Officer of Inkhouse, a public relations counseling firm that he has worked at for over ten years. Jason started his career in 1998 at Schwartz Communications, a public relations agency in Boston, MA that focused on emerging technology companies and MSLGroup, which acquired Schwartz in 2011. He grew to be the Executive Vice President of the company over 16 years of work. He has been working in the public relations industry for over 25 years.

With a marketing degree from Bentley University in the Marketing Honors Program, Jason has used his strong communication skills to pursue his career in public relations. According to Pace PR, marketing and public relations share many similarities including branding, communication, relationship building, and an integrated approach. Marketing is seen as the umbrella for public relations and advertising. As such, Jason has been able to have a successful career in the public relations industry without a specific public relations degree. Jason was exposed to the world of public relations and advertising through a number of different internships throughout college. When graduating, Jason was faced with the decision between public relations and advertising. He ultimately chose public relations as it offered a higher salary at the time, but he now values public relations over advertising for different reasons. Jason's beliefs are that in advertising, you're paying to simply get a message out, but with public relations you are crafting an in depth story and getting it through channels that involve more earned placement. Jason explains, "Public relations is a little bit less just creating assets and paying to distribute them but instead trying to convince people to engage with the story that you're crafting."

Although Jason is not currently a part of any specific professional societies, he acknowledges their value, specifically at the beginning of one's career. With years of experience and a strong focus on work/life balance, Jason now values professional development over involvement in professional organizations.

COMPANY OVERVIEW

Inkhouse is a mid-sized strategic communications agency based in San Francisco, California. It is built of about 140 people offering public relations, content creation, and digital marketing strategies. It is a part of the Orchestra network, a communications company focused on the emerging new media landscape. Inkhouse began in 2007, founded by Beth Monaghan, and specializes in working with technology companies and venture capital firms. Its original purpose was to assist early stage companies, but Inkhouse now supports a wide range of companies from start ups to established brands. Their programs integrate public relations and digital content strategies in order for companies to reach their targeted audiences and goals. With locations in Boston, San Francisco, New York, Seattle, San Diego, and Washington D.C., Inkhouse is a successful agency providing excellent counseling to a variety of clients.

Driven by storytelling, with an expertise and flexibility in specific business needs, Inkhouse caters to a wide range of companies. Inkhouse offers specific programs for early stage startups, high growth companies, late stage companies, and established brands. These customized programs are what set Inkhouse apart from competitors, as it has a plan catered to everyone. Some clients of Inkhouse include Cava, Robin AI, Irrigreen, AT&T Cybersecurity, and Citi Ventures.

Jason's favorite things about working for Inkhouse are the variety in the company's offerings and the agency culture. Every day is different for Jason as Inkhouse works for companies ranging from robotics and artificial intelligence to cybersecurity and climate technology. Additionally, the company culture at Inkhouse is of importance to Jason as he believes in a professional service environment, you are paying for the people just as much as the service. Therefore, Jason says, "Having really smart, tenured, and kind people that you want to work with every day is the key to delivering outstanding client experience, and it's what keeps clients at Inkhouse for the long haul." Inkhouse has been recognized in *PR News*' 2024 Agency Elite Top 100 and *PR News*' 2023 Platinum Awards as a finalist, showcasing its excellence in the public relations industry.

INTERVIEWEE'S ROLE

As CEO, Jason does "pretty much everything" in his day to day work. Jason contributes to overall company operations, growth, and culture. He also pitches news and networks with other executives and venture capitalists. In three words, Jason describes his responsibilities as, "Culture, growth, and operations." Culture is of high importance to Jason and the entirety of Inkhouse, so he places an emphasis on it as CEO. He also remains involved in some client work, but to a lesser extent than before becoming CEO. By playing this role, Jason advances the mission of Inkhouse by fostering a strong agency culture, leading company growth, and maintaining service excellence across the firm. His strong leadership and commitment to Inkhouse align with the company values of "Work Hard & Be Nice To People" and drive the business forward.

PR SPECIALIZATION

Inkhouse specializes in working with technology and venture capital firms, although the agency still engages in work with companies outside of these industries. They offer public relations counseling, content creation, and digital marketing strategies. They help companies by allowing them to tell their own story while building market leadership, expanding reach, and upholding reputation. One interesting thing about Inkhouse's strategic planning is they tailor each plan to the different levels of a company's growth. For example, for early stage startups, Inkhouse helps establish a company's story and vision while expanding their content and launch. For high growth companies, they will build the brand and earn third party validation, which is also referred to as earned media. The APR study guide defines earned media as publicity, and states that it is, "An uncontrolled method of placing messages because the source does not pay the media for placement and cannot guarantee if or how the material will be used." For late stage companies, Inkhouse will focus on making the organization a leader in their specific market/category. Lastly, for established brands, Inkhouse will find new relevance for the brand to maintain relevance within their industry. These are the things that set Inkhouse apart from competitors and allow them to be a dominating force in the public relations field.

DEFINING PUBLIC RELATIONS

Jason's role aligns closely with the definition of public relations. According to Grunig and Hunt in *Public Relations*, PR is, "The management of communication between an organization and its publics." Many aspects of his role reflect this definition. For example, Jason is involved in pitching news and networking with professionals which are both forms of external communications. Also, this shows engagement with the publics of Inkhouse. Along with this,

Jason's emphasis on company culture is a great example of the internal communications that he does for the company. However, Jason's responsibility of growth and overall operations extend beyond this definition of public relations, but they remain core functions of his role. Jason also noted that he engages in less client work as CEO than he did in the past, which may not align with the textbook definition of public relations.

SKILLS

Specific skills needed for this sector include storytelling, data analysis, and content creation. At the forefront of Inkhouse's plans, storytelling is key to their client work. Good writing and narration is held to high importance. Not sounding too "corporate" or "pitchy" makes audiences feel more connected to the brand and their mission. Along with this, data analysis is important to analyze the impacts of the client work Inkhouse creates. After a campaign or plan is initiated, it is crucial to evaluate the impacts that it had on the company and its audiences, and if the goals and objectives were reached. Lastly, content creation is a key function of Inkhouse, as they offer it as an asset to business plans. Content creation brings stories to life, allowing for clients' messages to resonate with audiences and be amplified.

EXPECTATIONS

Before conducting this interview, I had vague expectations of what public relations would look like in real life. I expected a focus on social media work, crisis communications, and media relations. However, Jason's work goes above and beyond these expectations. This shows how public relations is more than simply communications, but is a function that supports long term company growth and support.

As for Jason's role specifically, I honestly expected more of a hands-off, high level role as CEO. However, Jason still has involvement in client work, even at a small scale. I was surprised by his involvement in company culture and it being so central to their approach to public relations. Jason and Inkhouse emphasize that culture, while commonly seen as an HR function, is an essential function to public relations. Culture is seen as a vital component to running a successful agency, and for Inkhouse this is prioritized in order to give clients the best experience.

ADVICE

Jason was quick to offer advice about the public relations field and how to best prepare for a career in the field. First, Jason suggested that it is never too early to start an internship if you have interest in public relations. It was through internships that Jason found his love for public relations while pursuing a marketing degree. Additionally, Jason believes that within the next decade, artificial intelligence will dramatically change public relations and how we conduct it from the past 25 years of his experience. According to Jason, "Communications and PR are going to become much more about being a strategic advisor than it is like the everyday execution of writing content or pitching reporters. It's just going to impact everything we do." Artificial intelligence will automate many of the basic functions of public relations, such as content generation creation. Jason advises becoming very familiar with AI tools like ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini, as he sees these tools becoming part of the everyday work load very quickly.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Jason's experience in the public relations industry was insightful and relevant to my studies. Before speaking with Jason, I had not given much thought to the aspect of running an organization and how public relations can support that aspect of a company. Jason's trajectory from establishing relationships with reporters and securing positive media coverage to leading company operations and growth makes me even more excited about what my future in public relations holds.

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