

BOOK REVIEW

**Business Acumen for Strategic Communicators: A
Primer**

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Business Acumen for Strategic Communicators: A Primer

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In “*Business Acumen for Strategic Communicators: A Primer*,” Matt Ragas and Ron Culp add an incredibly valuable contribution to their already extensive work designed to help strategic communication students and professionals expand their understanding of business terminology and practices. In this most recent offering, Ragas and Culp expand upon their first book, “*Business Essentials for Strategic Communicators: Creating Shared Value for the Organizations and its Stakeholders*” (2014) and “*Mastering Business for Strategic Communicators: Insights and Advice from the C-Suite of Leading Brands*” (2018) that offered sage advice from leading strategic communication industry professionals. In her review of the “*Mastering Business for Strategic Communicators*,” Swann (2019) notes that, “where their first book gave students a solid business foundation, this book takes the reader into the mind of the senior communication professional” (p. 145).

“Business Acumen for Strategic Communicators: A Primer” offers a strong update of much of the materials in *Business Essentials*. As noted in the preface to *Business Acumen*, public relations professionals and educators have long called for the field to have a place at the decision-making level of an organization. One factor holding back public relations and other strategic communicators is their lack of understanding of, and ability to converse with, basic business terminology.

The need for strategic communication students to understand business practices better is a common theme in public relations literature. Cannon and Waymer (2016) referenced research by Ragas et al. (2015) noting that senior public relations executives “believed public relations educators should put greater emphasis on business thinking in public relations classes” (Cannon & Waymer, p. 106).

In May of 2015, 50 leading practitioners and educators in the field of public relations were brought together in an effort to develop a consensus on the knowledge, skills and attributes (KSAs) that are important for entry-level public relations employees. While many of the nine knowledge areas identified by the group can be tied to business acumen, two were specific about the need for training in business practices: “Business processes and planning. ‘Business acumen,’ described as understanding how business works, to provide the contextual significance of public relations” (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2015, p. 8). Additionally, Brunner et al. (2018) note that both professionals and educators wish for greater business acumen among PR students and entry-level employees:

DiStaso et al. (2009) found professionals and academics agreed that entry-level employees should have skills, both hard and soft, including

good attitudes, initiative, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, organization skills, interpersonal skills, flexibility, knowledge of media, knowledge of current events, creativity, the ability to take criticism, and understanding of basic business practices. Again, the findings showed that entry-level employees are sorely lacking in all the above skills, but they were rated especially low for knowledge of current events and business practices. Similarly, Auger and Cho (2016) found public relations programs are still lacking in requirements for business courses in the curriculum. These findings suggest that educators need to place greater emphasis on these areas and types of knowledge. (Brunner, et al., 2018, p. 24)

Commission on Public Relations Education reports, for example, the 2006 “Professional Bond” report and the 2017 report (DiStaso, 2019), also emphasized the need for greater instruction in the basics of business practice. Clearly there is strong evidence of consistent and long-term calls for an increase in business acumen in public relations students and practitioners.

Content Structure and Organization

The text is divided into six sections that help the reader to organize the information and make it easier to access the information later. Part I provides an introduction to the topic and text. The single chapter in the section defines business acumen and explains the importance and role of business acumen within the field of strategic communication.

Parts II and III outline three guiding approaches to business (II) and people (III) critical to business practice: stakeholders, the board of directors and the c-suite. Part IV includes three chapters that focus on the financial (money and the numbers) relations in business. The three chapters of part

IV are particularly useful, as they outline both basic, general information (e.g., how the stock market works) and specific practices in financial relations (e.g., how to read an income statement). Part V discusses the practice of strategic communication in agencies/consultancies and how it is practiced in in-house communication departments. The two chapters in part V would be excellent supplements even for material in an introductory public relations course. The final part (chapter 12) offers insight into how individuals can enhance their business acumen and explains how an understanding of business can enrich a professional career.

Each chapter offers several pedagogical elements that instructors may find useful. The list of key terms in the chapter provides a quick study sheet for students and the discussion questions can be used for many purposes, including for classroom discussion, report/paper topics, or exam questions. The final pedagogical element is a sidebar piece authored by a strategic communication professional who discusses topics related to the chapter. Ragas and Culp are to be congratulated for selecting sidebar authors who represent the entire spectrum of strategic communication professionals.

Following the final chapter of the text, the authors offer several sections that make this book a particularly useful addition to a professional's reference materials. The glossary is over 40 pages in length and offers definitions and explanations for hundreds of terms, ranging from accelerator to zero-based-budgeting. The references section offers readers a quick reference to works related to the various topics discussed, and the additional information on the sidebar contributors helps the reader to understand the contributor's perspective.

Contribution to Public Relations Education

"Business Acumen" is written as a supplementary text and can be paired

with a wide variety of topics in the public relations curriculum. The most obvious use is as a supplement to courses in public relations management, case studies and/or campaigns, but it should be considered as a supplement to all courses in the curriculum. Because of the broad application possibilities for this work, programs may consider requiring the book for all public relations students, allowing individual course instructors to require all or a portion of the book for a specific course.

Individual chapters can supplement the discussion of topics that are found in multiple classes. For example, chapter 5, “Stakeholders and Society” would be a wonderful addition to discussions of stakeholder relations, CSR initiatives, social advocacy, and DEI programs. The final chapter of the text discusses the role of business acumen in professional development and offers ten ways for students to build their business acumen, before and after graduation.

Ragas and Culp have written the material in this text so that it is easily understood by those with little or no understanding of investor relations and/or business practices. While the writing is accessible to all, practitioners will find the breadth of the material helpful to build on their current knowledge.

Conclusion

This review began with a brief examination of calls for greater business education in the public relations curriculum. “Business Acumen for Strategic Communicators: A Primer” by Matthew Ragas and Ron Culp is the answer to those calls. After reviewing the information in this book, public relations students should have an easier time passing a business and finance knowledge quiz (Vahouny, 2021), have an easier time successfully transitioning into the field, and find success in their professional practice.

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