

COLE BAWEK:

PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR ASHLEY FURNITURE

Careers can evolve in interesting ways, and you never know when an opportunity will arise that ends up leading you down an entirely different path from where you began. For Cole Bawek, 2016 George Washington University graduate, taking a chance on a new direction has seen him build a successful career in public relations with furniture company Ashley Furniture Industries.

After joining the strategic sales division team at Ashley Furniture in 2013, Cole began looking for ways to make a more personal contribution to its business and culture. While he was exploring openings across the company, the charitable work being done by its public relations department caught his attention. "When I came to Ashley I was able to be exposed to all of these different careers, and the one that intrigued me the most was public relations," he says. "They do a lot of work in the local community, and I knew this was the area of the business where I could see myself thrive and grow."

Cole was offered a position as public relations specialist, where he helped to produce a range of internal and external communications to highlight company news and events. It didn't take long to realize he had found his niche, both with Ashley and his career, and he decided to pursue a graduate degree to further develop his skills and pursue leadership opportunities in the department.

"I already knew I wanted to advance my career in this field, so I started researching different master's degrees," he says. "I found George Washington University and was amazed to find out the Master of Strategic Public Relations was voted as the nation's top PR education program of the year. If I'm working with an industry leader I wanted to have the industry-leading degree, and I knew the program would help put me in the best possible position to advance."



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Public Relations for Ashley Furniture





Since graduation, Cole has earned that advancement – being promoted to Ashley Furniture’s director of public relations. The position has put him in charge of media and community outreach, event management and even government relations. Among his favorite new responsibilities is overseeing Ashley for the Arts, a nonprofit music and arts festival held annually near the company’s headquarters in Arcadia, Wisconsin. The event was founded in 2009 and has grown from 300 attendees in its inaugural year to recent crowds numbering in the tens of thousands.

“Last year we had 50,000 attendees and raised over \$425,000 to support 40 nonprofit organizations, most of which included local school districts’ music and art programs,” he says. “I think what’s made it so successful is affordable access. We only charge \$10 admission for the entire two-day event, and we’ve had bands like Chicago, the Beach Boys, the Fray, Gavin DeGraw, NeedToBreathe and Kip Moore. Being able to see the growth from when it started to where it’s at now, not only in terms of artists and attendees but also in terms of the schools we’re able to support, has been such a rewarding experience. It’s a real community event.”

Being good at your job takes dedication, but being able to help steer initiatives that impact a company, its customers and the public requires a special kind of thought leader. By following the initial spark of inspiration that drew him to public relations, Cole has found the right outlet for his talents as a communicator and business professional. Recently surpassing a half a decade with Ashley Furniture, he’s quick to credit his graduate education from George Washington University for helping him grow in the field, and the continued influence it has as he supports his company and collaborates with peers.

“By the end of the program I felt I had a great base of resources to utilize within the company and provide knowledge that we didn’t have before,” he says. “Now I am the head of the public relations department and have been utilizing my education every day in my role. I’ve been able to pass on what I learned to my team members and also use the experience I have to help the company continue to grow and lead in the industry.”

“If you want a world-class education to position yourself for future growth in the public relations field,” Cole said, “this is absolutely the best institute to learn from.”

Visit PublicRelationsMasters.online.gwu.edu or call [1.888.989.7068](tel:1.888.989.7068) for more information about the George Washington University Master’s in Strategic Public Relations program online.

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