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Summer Internship 2009: Cone Inc.

This summer, I interned at Cone Inc., a public relations and marketing company in Boston. I was exposed to the company's two largest departments: Brand Marketing Group and, particularly, Cause Branding. Even prior to the internship, my primary interest was in the Cause Branding department. Cause Branding, which applies PR and marketing techniques to further nonprofits' and for-profits' causes, was extensively developed by founder and chairwoman Carol Cone.

My background in internships and volunteer experience has firmly been in the nonprofit camp, and I had concerns – before and throughout the internship – about “selling out.” Cause Branding was a way to learn about the industry in a way that still had a positive impact on issues I cared about. The primary accounts I worked on in Cause were American Heart Association, a longtime client, Time Warner Cable, a client in final stages, and new client Boys and Girls Clubs of America. In just nine weeks with Cone, I was able to see all stages of a successful Cause campaign through these three accounts.

My general duties as a Cause intern included compiling weekly media scans on the accounts and relevant subject areas; media audits for longer periods, my longest for three years; “top-line” documents with comprehensive summaries, sub-issues, and relevant news hits and statistics for a variety of issues; a variety of smaller duties like copying, printing, proofing, and formatting; extensive research of relevant statistics and media hits; and more.

The Brand Marketing Group, or “BMG,” was more classically public relations-based in approach, and my duties differed there. In addition to some of the above, I was also offered the opportunity to not just speak with the media but actually pitch for a

client. I was fortunate in which accounts I was assigned to; some, like Guayakí Yerba Mate, a producer of natural tea that promotes rainforest growth, I was especially proud to represent and pitch for. Nonetheless, BMG represents all kinds of for-profit companies, and I did extensive research on behalf of a pet food supplier whose preparation methods and ingredient makeup I disagree with.

Occasionally, I'd wonder: was this the beginning of a slippery slope? I've been accustomed to working with nonprofits whose vision means something to me personally; what was I sacrificing here? In retrospect, it seems extreme – too much cornmeal in the pet food, and I was having very minor panic attacks – and Cone's standards and recommendations to all clients embrace corporate, ecological, and moral responsibility. Still, it's a question I'll need to really ask myself when I examine my future career path: am I ready to occasionally bite my cheek, force a smile on my face, and make the case for the opposite side?

Of course, that's part of the job of the anthropology student: looking at the 'opposite' side and trying to make it comprehensible. In general, public relations and marketing are very imbued with basic anthropological principles; getting to know the new client Boys and Girls Clubs of America, for instance, team members read a highly detailed packet put together by yours truly that included a grammar and writing style guide the organization strictly adhered to – a mini corporate ethnography, complete with a lesson in the BGCA language.

Ultimately, this was an extremely instructive internship, and my mentors exposed me to a variety of aspects of the industry. Despite my few moral reservations that apply to the for-profit field in general, I'd highly recommend it to anyone interested in an

introduction to PR and/or marketing. It was an excellent internship for networking, letters of recommendation, and building portfolio pieces as well.

Plus, there are the bragging rights; when passing through Cambridge the other day, my parents and I saw signs for Boston's American Heart Association Start! Walk. One of the sponsor's names was on the banner.

"Hey," I said, not quite able to control my smug grin. "I researched that company as a potential AHA sponsor earlier this summer." It wasn't just me alone, obviously, that made this partnership possible, but I contributed. The banners were on practically every streetlamp, and I couldn't help but strut a little when we passed them.