

An Interview with [J.W. Cannon](#)

Senior Project Lead – Sponsorships and Events with UPS

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When did you graduate from JMU?

1998

Did you have a favorite class or professor during your time at JMU?

“One of my professors that re-inspired me to really go back on the sports management track, as I originally thought my career was aimed at going into campus recreation after being inspired by some of the opportunities to get more involved at the student level and with the national organizations, was Dr. Laura Sawyer. While she was only there for a couple of years, she had some experience with facilities and with teams, and was the first real practitioner that they brought in from the outside. She really inspired me to take a second look at sports management as a discipline and refocus what I wanted to do with my career. I still maintain close ties with her today and I credit her with getting me back on the path of focusing on sports management.”

What student activities/organizations were you involved in?

“I played baseball my first year at JMU, which helped me focus where I wanted to go with my career once I got out of the sport. So I ended up stumbling into Kinesiology and into campus recreation as one of the first employees at UREC, which helped me establish a bit of a direction for where I wanted to go with my career. I worked at UREC for the last three and a half years that I was there, and was also a founding father of Kappa Alpha.”

Did you have any mentors during your time at JMU or the early part of your career that helped shape your professional development in working in the sports industry?

“The folks at UREC, some of whom are still in place there today, were the ones who really helped me understand that there were career possibilities out of what I was doing as a student and that I would only continue to learn more things with time, as well as by taking leadership positions and getting involved with national organizations to get outside of the bubble of JMU and explore what else is out there. I absolutely credit those people with helping me really focus and refine on something. When you go to college, you’re experiencing so many different things, it’s hard to stay focused on what the next step is. They were really able to help guide me down the path of saying ‘Alright, this is something I can do for a career. This is something I feel like I can be successful at and enjoy doing.’”

How did you get your start in the industry?

“My first step was actually an internship, which I needed to complete to get my degree. To that point, I had decided that I was going to go into campus recreation and was applying for graduate assistantships and going to the annual NIRSA convention, and I said ‘Let me take an internship that is different from what I think I want to do that is more business-focused.’ That internship happened to be with a company called Advantage International, which is now called Octagon. It was near my hometown and allowed me to live at home and work for free, like a lot of people do in this industry, and figure out what

I wanted to do and get some different experience. It was that experience that helped me decide that, while I had put a lot of time and effort into campus recreation, this is what I wanted to do. My first job out of that internship was moving down to Atlanta and selling sponsorships for the Georgia Games, the state Olympics. Like a lot of people, I cut my teeth in sales, which I think is a good place for a lot of people to get a basic level of understanding of the industry: how people evaluate opportunities, how people position opportunities, how sales interacts with the rest of the organization and helps the organization go. While I was there only a year, I learned more in that one year than I have in any other job I've had in my career by virtue of having to learn not only how to sell, but how to position it the right way and how to keep clients happy. There's a lot that you can learn from a job like that."

From there, how did you get to your current position?

"So after I went to the Georgia Games, I went to work for a small business startup called KAB Management. It was an agency that was designed to bring over small European clients and businesses to the United States that didn't necessarily have the legs to start on their own. The reason they hired me was to handle one of their largest clients, which was a German umbrella manufacturer that was in the golf space. We essentially were responsible for building all aspects of their business, including sales and marketing strategies, doing PR, and accounting. We registered them with the Secretary of State, we ran distribution strategies, and we warehoused and shipped the products. We did all of these various things, and so I kind of became a little bit more involved from a general business perspective there. I was there for three and a half years and worked with a number of different clients in the high-tech space and some different things there, and I decided that I wanted to do some bigger things. So I called up my old contacts at Octagon, who just so happened to have signed a client in Atlanta with The Home Depot who had a position that opened up with their sponsorship of College GameDay and all of their regional properties. Over the five years that I worked there I traveled with College GameDay, I worked on their regional sponsorships, I worked on the NFL, I worked on the Olympics, I worked on their entertainment properties, US Soccer, the Mexican national team, Major League Baseball. Basically everything that The Home Depot did over those five years outside of NASCAR. Over that time, I was promoted two times. I ended up working on some different client account teams with AutoTrader as well as Bank of America for a few years. From there, I was offered an opportunity to jump to the brand side and work with an old colleague of mine that I had at Octagon with ING, now Voya Financial. At that time, they were still trying to figure out how to position themselves in the United States. A year prior, they had invested in the New York City Marathon as a primary sponsorship, and they felt that the running space was a place where they could build some equity, but they needed someone to come in and help structure that program. While I was there, we built running into a national platform for ING, and over that time we added additional responsibilities to our group: not just managing those sponsorships but to gradually merge all of the event and trade show functions with our group over time and managed everything from NCAA team deals to sponsorships of different groups and organizations. We kind of handled all of the event and experiential marketing for the company. And from there, I jumped to UPS. A call from a person that I knew at UPS who was active in the running community and had run in a number of our races called and offered me the opportunity to run their efforts to continue to grow their business domestically in college sports."

What sorts of responsibilities do you have in your current role with UPS?

"I basically oversee our domestic sponsorship portfolio, which is primarily invested in college sports. We no longer invest in the individual conferences, but we still do have a relationship as the logistics partner of the NCAA. We have a relationship with IMG College, which gives us rights to 78 bidding schools. I also

handle all of our local relationships that we have with the Braves, Falcons, Hawks, and a handful of deals that we have that are significant to our business like the Minnesota Timberwolves. We also work with our domestic operations, which governs all of our districts across the country to help set their strategies for dozens and dozens of partnerships that we indirectly manage. In addition to that, I also oversee our corporate events and trade show function, which is a worldwide function.”

What excites you most about working in this position?

“The people that I work with everyday are fantastic. That goes for the people that I work with day-to-day, all of my key stakeholders internally, and the partners that we work with. This is an industry that is built on people, and at the end of the day while you don’t necessarily have to like the people you work with, you have to respect them. I actually have both. I’m lucky that I love coming to work every day and that I’m not watching the clock every day, which is something that is very important to me.”

What skills are important in your line of work?

“The two things that I always look for in folks that I hire are flexibility and resourcefulness. When I say flexibility, I mean their ability to think about things differently, their willingness to learn things and how to process challenges differently, and their willingness to try different things that they haven’t done before. To me, I think that is a very important part of this industry, and part of growing up in a career, as at some point you’re going to have to learn new some skills to keep progressing. In terms of resourcefulness, I mean the ability to solve problems with little direction or to think about things in a different way. I always condition to my folks that I am a “point A to point B” type of manager. Point A is where you start and point B is where I expect you to end up, and how you get there is up to you. I want you to help figure it out. I will have an open door and provide you guidance and help provide you the resources to get there, but I can’t take you and drag you down the path. You have to kind of figure out some of those things on your own.”

Are there any particular concepts or courses that you draw on from your time at JMU that have helped you succeed in your career?

“To me, the best classes I took were business-related classes, and they weren’t sports marketing classes. It sounds weird to say that, but the one thing you learn after a number of years in this industry is that, at the end of the day, we’re all business people trying to solve business problems. So you have to think like a business person. There’s a reason that people use sports from a business perspective. It’s because it can help them make money. To me, I think the more that you can understand about the basic tenets of business, the more successful you will be in this industry. If you approach this industry purely as a sports marketer, it’s a dangerous way to go. If I’m hiring somebody whose interest in getting a job with me is because they love sports, that’s a warning flag to me. I want to understand their love of business, because, at the end of the day, I’m not going to be judged based on somebody’s passion for what they do. I’m going to be judged based on their business results. So, they need to have strong business acumen, and to me those are the best kinds of courses that you can take. You can refine them through sports management courses, but you have to have a really strong understanding of the way the business world works, including accounting, statistics, analytics, management, those kinds of things.”

What sorts of challenges have you faced during your time in the industry?

“To be completely honest, I underestimated the impact that the business would take on personal relationships. I underestimated how much of a toll the travel and the amount of hours would have on personal relationships, and that includes family, friends, spouses, et cetera. It took some time for me to

wake up and understand what my priorities were in life. There will be a time that everyone in this industry will have to have that conversation with a significant other or family member about missing things due to being on the road. These things will inevitably happen in this industry, so it's important that you set up your personal relationships in the right way in order to best manage that. And it becomes harder as you grow up. It's important that, if you truly love your job and that you're in a position that requires you to make this heavy time commitment to it, that you should have an honest conversation with those people about what is acceptable and what is not, and you adjust based on that."

How were you able to overcome them?

"When I first got into the corporate world, coming from the agency side where the client's always emailing you, one of my bosses told me 'When you walk out of here, I don't expect an answer from you in email. If there is something that is absolutely important, I'll call you.' That has kind of been my philosophy ever since I joined the brand side of things. There's a time for work, and there's a time for you to enjoy your personal time. When I walk out of my office, my staff and the people that I report to know that I'm accessible if they need me, but don't expect me to be on email until three o'clock in the morning. You can't always put yourself in that position, but I do think you have to draw personal lines with whatever job you have to make time for both. We're so interconnected today that sometimes it's good to unplug, and you have to condition the people around you to accept that."

What do you perceive to be the next steps of your career?

"To me, I think leading a department from a sponsorships perspective, or perhaps leading a department in another marketing function. While I love the sports industry, the reason I got into it was first and foremost my love of business, not necessarily my love of sports. I see myself as a strategic marketer, so to me, my next step in my career would probably be a director-level of leading a department from a sports management perspective or doing some other strategic marketing for a company."

Could you talk a little bit about the sports business Twitter forum, #sbchat, that you co-founded?

"Myself and a gentleman by the name of Lou Imbriano, who has his own Venture Capital firm now but is most well-known for his position as CMO of the Patriots, have been friends for a number of years. When Twitter was developed, I gradually started to connect with folks there and found that there were quite a few sports business people on there. The one thing that we found in there was that there was a void of a forum for helping newcomers to the industry understand the dynamics of the marketplace and how to navigate it properly. So, we saw this as an opportunity not only to engage the sports business community and network with fellow professionals, but also to educate some of the young up-and-comers and give them an opportunity to interact with professionals in the business who have been there and done that. It's open to anybody who has a Twitter account and wants to join us from 9:30 to 10:30 every Sunday evening. We will publish questions, and people will follow along with the hashtag and participate in the conversation. We do a mixture of questions each week: some of them are more current events types of questions about what's going on in the industry, some are best practice-oriented around subjects like measurement or who is doing social media the best way, and some of them are career-oriented such as how to help navigate yourself in the sports business industry or resume tips and tricks. Largely, Lou and I come up with the questions on a weekly basis, but in many cases we put out a call for questions as well and taking suggestions. Social media is amazing to me in how many people are engaged in it for one, but how personal and how connected that you can get in the environment. I've met a lot of people through Twitter just by being an active participant in the conversation about sports

business, a lot of people who have become good friends and colleagues. I've done business with folks who I've met through Twitter, and I've spoken at engagements because of my connectivity on Twitter. It's amazing to me the amount of connectivity that some of those mediums provide. If kids today don't take advantage of that connectivity to expose themselves to the conversations that are taking place in those forums and using it to their advantage then shame on them because the opportunity is ripe for them to take."

You were named one of the top 100 Must-Follow Sports Business Twitter Accounts of 2014 by Forbes. How do you feel that your use of social media has helped to shape your personal brand as a professional in the industry?

"I'm a learner, and I'm always trying to stay up to speed on what the current trends are and what's going on not just in my industry, but in the business world in general. I think it's a space where you get out of it what you're willing to put into it. If all you want to do is be a reader then that's all you're going to get out of it. If you really want the interactivity and to really hear from people on your personal opinions, you have to get involved and you have to be willing to share and to provide that kind of thought leadership. To me, it's been worth that time investment to do that, because I think it's actually made me a more well-rounded business person. I've learned a lot of stuff from what's going on in there, and I can take what I'm learning in that space and what I'm reading and how I'm interacting with that space and apply it to my job on a day-to-day basis. So, to me, the position that I've always taken is one of just trying to provide some level of thought leadership – lessons I've learned, interesting things that I've found, trends that I see in the industry – and just sharing that information with other folks. I mix in a little bit of personal stuff here and there, but largely the position that I've taken in building my brand is that if I can be a resource for someone in the industry who is looking for it, it's interesting to me and helps remind me of the types of information that's there and helps me consume the information, and if it helps others do the same thing then great."

Has social media impacted how you do your job? If so, how?

"Without question. If you're not engaging with social media, you're missing out on a lot of the really good real-time conversations that are going on in the world. It's a fascinating place to learn from, not just about what information is on there but how people engage and interact with each other. I think that's really important in the marketing world because you need to understand where people are having conversations and where brands can insert themselves and not be disruptive in that conversation."

How can SRM students use social media to position themselves for success in their future careers?

"First off, if you don't realize that people are watching or aren't going to read what you say then think again, because people do. So it's important that when you write things in there, that you write it with the intent that everyone has access to it and everyone will read it. If you don't think like that, you're going to make a lot of mistakes, and the problem with social media today is that those mistakes live on forever with the internet. You've seen people in recent years come up with Tweets or Facebook posts from three or four years ago that somebody wrote when they were young, and now they're going to regret it because it's out there for the world to see. You may not remember writing it or what was being said, but it's out there. So it's important to think now about that, you've got to think ten years ahead of now about what you're saying today."

What are your thoughts on the pursuit of an advanced degree to work in your line of work and the industry as a whole?

“To me, and advanced degree is a very personal decision, and is dependent upon what a student wants. If anyone were to ask me if an advanced degree is required in this industry I would tell you absolutely not. I think that experience speaks a lot more than book smarts do in this industry, but that doesn’t mean that there are not advantages to getting an advanced degree. There’s the connectivity, the higher level of business learning associated with graduate and MBA-level programs. Those kind of things you don’t always get from an undergraduate level. If you feel like you need or want that, then that can be important. If you get a degree from a program that doesn’t have a lot of alumni connectivity or networking capabilities, sometimes an advanced degree from a university that does have those capabilities can help you as well.”

If you could go back to JMU what would you change?

“I feel like I did a pretty good job of trying to set myself up for success because I knew early on that I was going to have to do a significant amount of the heavy lifting on my own. So, while I think that’s good, I wish that I would have gotten started on that sooner. I wish that I would have started making connections or started making phone calls or started asking the questions that I asked later in life. I wish that I would have started on that sooner. The first tendency for people when they get to college is to be as independent as possible, that your mind tends to run a little bit wild. I wish I would have taken the time to focus a lot sooner because I feel that it would have benefitted me a lot more. I had to work that much harder in my junior and senior years to figure out where I wanted to go in my career because I didn’t really properly lay that groundwork. ”

What types of resources would you encourage current SRM students to aid in their professional development?

“Social channels, especially LinkedIn and especially Twitter. To me, LinkedIn is the world’s resume, and if you don’t have some sort of professional profile on there and you’re not reaching out and engaging with people in that industry on there then shame on you. Those people are there to be engaged with. I think Twitter is a fantastic place to have real-time conversations and to share thought leadership. Again, both of these are free tools, and if you are not making the time to build up a personal brand and engage in that space in an effective way, shame on you because it’s available for you.”

What is one overall piece of advice that you would give to current students in the SRM program?

“Don’t underestimate the power of a personal connection. Don’t underestimate a personal thank you note, a phone call, an in-person meeting to shake a hand. Those personal interactions are still very, very important. Even though we’ve transitioned into a virtual society, any time that you can actually get in-front of somebody and meet them and shake their hand and talk to them face-to-face, that goes still a lot longer way than any sort of email or LinkedIn connection will ever do.”