



Episode 7: Anthony Harrison (COM'81), Facebook Corporate Media Relations

Host: Jeff Murphy (Questrom'06), BU Alumni Relations

Leading a team tasked with telling Facebook's story has been both the ultimate challenge and the ultimate opportunity for Anthony Harrison (COM'81) who serves as Director of Corporate Media Relations for the social media giant. Anthony shares his journey from Comm. Ave to Silicon Valley as a seasoned PR expert with experience shaping brands like LexisNexis, Microsoft and Starbucks.

Podcast Transcript:

Jeff Murphy: I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU Podcast. My guest today is Anthony Harrison, the Director of Corporate Media Relations at Facebook. Anthony graduated from the College of Communication in the class of 1981 and since then has become a living, breathing PR Swiss army knife. He joined the team at Facebook after working in senior roles at some of America's best known brands, including Starbucks, Microsoft, and more. We spoke about his dynamic journey and the ways in which he is using his career to further the cause of diversity and inclusion wherever he goes.

Anthony, it's a pleasure to chat with you today. Thanks so much for being here. If we could, I'd like to start out chronologically and if you could tell me a little bit about where you grew up and sort of lead into how you found yourself at Boston University for your university experience.

Anthony Harrison: Absolutely. So I grew up in Jamaica, Queens in New York and the funny story is I actually decided to go to BU because I wanted to get away from New Yorkers. Which is kind of humorous since when I was an undergraduate I think one third of the student body was from the tristate area: New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. So I didn't quite achieve my goal, but I did get exposed to folks from other parts of the country, which is what I really wanted by going to an urban university like BU.

Jeff Murphy: So what was it that brought you to BU? Did you know specifically that you wanted to go to COM, that you wanted to be a PR person for your career?

Anthony Harrison: Not at all. I just wanted to get out of New York. I wanted to go to a big school that was in the city and just have an opportunity to sort of figure out what I wanted to learn and study and what I wanted to do with my life. It was after I was at BU for a year that I started to look around. I entered as a general undeclared liberal arts major and I started to look around at opportunities because there were so many different colleges at BU and eventually landed on the communication school because I think my core skill is writing. And so, the communication school offered me lots of different avenues to sort of explore what I could

do with an interest and a talent for writing in communication. So I dabbled in journalism, I dabbled in advertising, copywriting, and finally landed on public relations.

Jeff Murphy: So you just mentioned something really interesting. In chatting with alumni, I think people struggle sometimes their whole lives to identify what their core skills are. And you said fairly early on that you knew your core skill was writing. Had you always just known or was it something that you had to really kind of figure out?

Anthony Harrison: I was very fortunate both in grammar school and high school to have teachers that recognized I was a strong writer and really sort of encouraged that. And writing was a way for me to sort of escape and create different worlds. So I used to write stories featuring my friends as the main characters on these various adventures. So I've always enjoyed writing and it's always been nurtured by teachers along the way.

Jeff Murphy: I have two questions for you about your BU experience. The first one, I'd like to hear a little bit about your life outside of the classroom. Where did you live? What places did you like to hang out? Where would we have found you studying during that time? What are the places that you remember as being iconic on campus?

Anthony Harrison: I probably wasn't as hard a studier as I should be, if I'm honest. But, I lived in Daniels Hall, which was the far east end of campus on Beacon Street down by Mass Av. What was so great about it was that it was our dorm, there were some MIT frat houses and there were some Emerson College dorms. So it was this kind of little enclave of folks from different schools. So it was kind of the best of both worlds of being in a dorm, but also interacting with people from other schools, which was one of the great things about going to school in Boston. Daniels didn't have a cafeteria, so I ate at Myles Standish, which was again, just an amazing and fun experience. Interesting side note, my work study job my freshman year was working in the dish room for the cafeteria. I wouldn't wish that on anybody because the way food comes in from students after dinner is not necessarily the prettiest sight. But because we were on east campus or what was east campus, then we pretty much stuck to ourselves. So most of the time you would have found me in the study rooms at the dorm studying with my friends. Even though none of them were in communication, actually one of my roommates was but everybody else was in different disciplines. So we would study in one of the study rooms. So I didn't study at the Union or the library unless it was like for an exam. So most of my studying was happening either in my room or in one of the study rooms at my dorm

Jeff Murphy: And tell me more about your academic experience here. Once you found yourself at COM and started to drill down on the thing that you decided you wanted to spend your time on, were there classes that really stood out to you, professors that you remember as having a profound impact on your experience?

Anthony Harrison: Absolutely. Probably the most profound experience was, as I mentioned, I took some classes in journalism, took some classes in advertising copywriting, actually did an advertising copywriting internship, but none of those felt quite right. And so I took the classic, I don't remember the exact name of it, but it was PR 101, the sort of introductory class to public relations and it was taught by the infamous Jerry Powers and everyone who has gone to COM when Jerry was there, knows Jerry and he had quite the shtick and quite the big personality. And, I absolutely fell in love with public relations because of that class and because of Jerry. Jerry ended up becoming a friend and a mentor throughout my career, continues to be a friend and mentor and has always been someone that I've been able to go to throughout my career for counsel and advice so that first PR class was super big. The



other one that was amazing, which just celebrated a significant anniversary was PR lab and so PR lab was the student run PR agency within the communications school and so that was amazing because I got to work with some small businesses and some local nonprofits and actually do PR as opposed to the theoretical of class. But actually working on writing press releases, working on talking to reporters, working with clients and developing plans and stuff. So that was the other class that really sort of stood out in my academic time in College of Communications.

Jeff Murphy: So knowing you as I do and I've been lucky to know you for a while now, it would seem to me that you've followed pretty much on a path that you had laid out for yourself while you were an undergrad. When you think about who you are now and you look back at who you were then, would college Anthony be surprised to see how your career has transpired?

Anthony Harrison: I actually think college Anthony would be surprised because adult Anthony, while adult Anthony has been in this field for many years, many decades in fact, college Anthony couldn't have imagined where that journey would have been. College Anthony was very content to stay in Boston. It would be very surprised that adult Anthony had lived and worked all over the country and the world. College Anthony would have been surprised at the variety of companies that adult Anthony has worked for and the things that adult Anthony has done. And I think that's because I've always been open to the possibility of different things as I've grown and matured personally and professionally and have always been willing to sort of take a risk or take a chance and try new things. And I think college Anthony would have been surprised that adult Anthony was that adventurous.

Jeff Murphy: One of the things that I think our recent graduates or young alumni would often want to know about other alumni is how you made the decisions of what to do once you had your degree in hand and it was time to leave Com Ave.

Anthony Harrison: You know, that's a good question. I talked to a lot of people. I talked to professors. I was very fortunate to get connected with a few alumni in my field and I took advantage of that. I took advantage of all the resources that the school had in terms of helping me find a job and I think I was focused on finding a job in a broad sense where I felt I could learn, continue to learn. Because I certainly knew that early in my career that there was still so much more I needed to learn and so I wasn't focused on "I must get this type of job with this specific type of company." I was just like, "Let me find a job at a company where I'm going to be able to continue to learn where I'm going to work with people who are willing to teach and mentor me and where I can sort of continue my education because I knew I wasn't done yet." And I truly tapped into all of the available resources to me as a graduating senior.

Jeff Murphy: So what were some of those first jobs? I know that you eventually ended up opening up your own firm, but tell us a little bit about that first couple of years of your career before you decided to open your own shop and the kind of jobs you had and the skills you gained.

Anthony Harrison: Yeah. The very first job was with a company that's no longer around, Digital Equipment Corporation as a technical writer. And what was so great about that job was I worked with some really great people that took me under their wing and helped me to learn what it was like to be a professional and what it was like to work in an office. And all of that stuff. I bounced around a little bit. I did some agency work. And then the first, really what I think of a significant job, was working for, what was at the time the local telephone company, New England Telephone that eventually became 9X and now Verizon. And that was amazing because I was able to sort of move around within the communications department, have a variety of opportunities and jobs and responsibilities and really sort of hone my craft. Figure



out what I was good at, figure out what I liked, move up in the organization and get promoted, relocate with the organization, leave Boston and go to New York to headquarters. And so after sort of bobbing around the first couple of years, it was someplace where I did grow professionally and mature professionally. And it really sort of laid the foundation for where my career went from there it enabled me to land jobs eventually at companies like Starbucks and Microsoft and LexisNexis and Disney and The New York Times. And so it was that sort of foundation work that I got from my time at Verizon that sort of led to that. And I've always, when I've thought about or explored or looked at what the next opportunity, it was always about, "Well, how can I expand my portfolio of skills? How can I challenge myself to do something that I maybe am not super comfortable with?" I'm always that person that actually likes kind of being thrown into a situation where I'm not completely comfortable and I don't know everything and sort of diving into the deep end of the pool and figuring it out and stuff like that. And so I've always looked at those kinds of opportunities that eventually led me to having my own consulting firm for a couple of years. Because by that point in my career, I had figured out what I liked, what I was really good at and was consulting with the kinds of companies and clients that I wanted to work with, doing the kind of work that I really, really wanted to work. Which I think is the beauty and benefit of consulting.

Jeff Murphy: So I'd be curious to know, it is obviously interesting that you had this fork in the road where you can continue to work at some of these great, amazing companies that you've worked at or start your own firm. And that's a pretty big decision that I think a lot of our listeners would want to hear more about. What advice do you have to share with folks who might find themselves in that position? "Do I stay on this path or do I take a bold leap and start my own firm?"

Anthony Harrison: Yeah, it does ultimately come down to sort of a very personal decision. And I think it's about what are your priorities? I ultimately, I decided to do consulting because I wanted more balance in my personal and professional life and I wanted to have more control over my professional life. And so by going into consulting and starting my own firm, which I always intended to be a solo practitioner, I wasn't interested in building a business. That's a whole different discussion that people have with themselves. But I was very clear that I wanted to be a solo practitioner because being a solo practitioner gave me the flexibility that I ultimately wanted by being a consultant and gave me the flexibility to work with the companies and people that I wanted to work with. To do the kind of work that I wanted to do and to work as hard as I want it to work. Because I was at a point in my life where I wanted to have more time for my personal life, for my family, etc. And so for me, it was a lifestyle decision. It was the ability to still do work that I found interesting and challenging, while also having the time to spend time with my husband and spend time with my family and that kind of thing. So I think when someone comes to that fork in the road, it's really thinking about what's most important to you at that point in your life. What really motivates you to get up out of bed in the morning and looking inside yourself to sort of figure that out for yourself. Because what, what gets me up in the morning is not necessarily going to be what gets somebody else up in the morning.

Jeff Murphy: There's two things on your LinkedIn profile that I wanted to ask you about. One of my goals for this podcast and in talking with all these great alumni is to help them understand the skills that they would need to be successful in any given industry. I should say, skills and personality traits. And so, one of the things that you say on your LinkedIn profile is that you love the power of words. Is that a prerequisite for anybody who's interested in going into PR, communications field, that sort of thing?



Anthony Harrison: I do think it is. I think it's important to love storytelling. I think at the core of communications, it's about telling stories and so you have to be passionate about telling stories and I think that is sort of at the core. And, I think of myself as an amazing storyteller and someone that can weave a story that will interest people, that will entice people, that will encourage people, that will empower people. All those kinds of things. So I think that's definitely at the core.

Jeff Murphy: You said that you're a great storyteller and you're right. I've been lucky enough to hear you tell a couple stories and you do a really great job with that. The other thing that I will agree with that you list on your profile is you say, "If we meet, you'll never forget me." I absolutely think that's true. I'm not sure I will ever forget you Mr. Harrison, but is that a prerequisite for being really successful in PR, being that kind of individual?

Anthony Harrison: [laughing] That's a good question. I think so. I think it's important you find out what makes you stand out. If you're going to be asked to promote and publicize someone else, you should be able to do that for yourself equally as effectively.

Jeff Murphy: So you made the decision after having your own business to close it up and go work for Facebook. Can you tell us a little bit about that decision?

Anthony Harrison: [laughing] It is interesting that at this point in my life and my career, when people are trying to figure out how to dial it down and slow it down, that I would do the exact opposite and go running into the burning building. [laughing]

Jeff Murphy: We should say your title at Facebook, you're the Director of Corporate Public Relations.

Anthony Harrison: Corporate Media relations.

Jeff Murphy: Thank you. So, interesting time to be at that company.

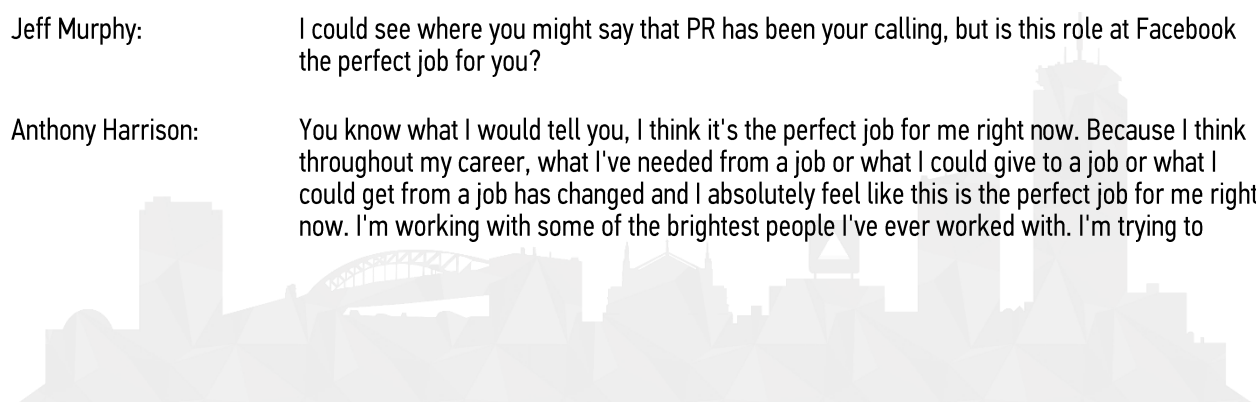
Anthony Harrison: Yeah, and that was ultimately what attracted me. To work for this company in communications at this point in time is just the ultimate challenge and the ultimate opportunity and I just couldn't pass that up.

Jeff Murphy: What do people, knowing your role at Facebook, what would the general outsider misunderstand about what your role is in the company?

Anthony Harrison: You know, they might not understand what media relations is. They might not understand that we as a company regularly talk to all kinds of reporters to help them understand who we are and what we're doing. Not just around the crises but also around the really good things that the company does in terms of bringing people together and building community and stuff like that. So it's important for any company to be engaged in telling its story and so I'm part of a team that helps tell Facebook's story.

Jeff Murphy: I could see where you might say that PR has been your calling, but is this role at Facebook the perfect job for you?

Anthony Harrison: You know what I would tell you, I think it's the perfect job for me right now. Because I think throughout my career, what I've needed from a job or what I could give to a job or what I could get from a job has changed and I absolutely feel like this is the perfect job for me right now. I'm working with some of the brightest people I've ever worked with. I'm trying to



solve and communicate around some of the most complicated issues that are there in the world today. It's pushing me to bring my A game every day, which I love and pushing me to up my game. Which I think at this point in my career, the fact that I can be challenged and pushed and continuing to learn is super exciting.

Jeff Murphy: I know that in the time that I've known you've really made yourself available to other alumni, to students who might aspire to work or to have the kind of career that you've had. Can you share with us what are those lessons that you have passed on to others? What's the advice that you can give to anybody who says, "Anthony, I'd really love to do what you do someday."

Anthony Harrison: I go back to something I said earlier, which is be open to the possibility, do things that scare you, don't be afraid to take a chance and don't be afraid to fail because failure brings real growth. And continue to look inside and know yourself at every step of the way as you grow and you evolve as a person and as a professional. Take in all that data, process all that data, ask for feedback, ask people what they think. I do my best thinking in conversations with people. I am not someone that goes off into a room and sorts things out of by myself. I'm much more likely to come up with a solution or a decision from a conversation, whether it's informally or formally. Because I'm always taking in what other people think, what their perspective is, what they bring to the table to help me sort of figure out what's the best thing.

Jeff Murphy: It's admittedly been a few years since your undergrad experience at BU, but I know that BU has remained a part of your life. You have been a really valuable member, a leadership volunteer for the BU Alumni Council doing some great work for us there. Can you talk a little bit about why you've decided to stay engaged with BU for your whole life?

Anthony Harrison: Well, I absolutely had a great educational and undergraduate experience at BU. I absolutely believe my training at BU, my education at BU is a key component to why I am successful today, the foundation things I learned there. And I also really was very fortunate early in my career and throughout my career to benefit from people who gave their time and advice and mentoring. And the only thing they all consistently asked was that when I was in a position to do that that I would do the same thing that I would always make time to help other people in their careers. And I feel like the work I get to do BU I get to do it on a larger scale as opposed to the one to one kind of coaching, mentoring kind of thing to have a larger impact, a broader impact.

Jeff Murphy: Well, you've certainly given me a lot of your time and I've really appreciated chatting with you today. Thank you for this. Thank you for all that you do for BU and again, I really appreciate you doing this for us Anthony.

Anthony Harrison: Sure, no problem. Always happy to do it. I love BU and I love doing stuff like this.

Jeff Murphy: All right, thanks again.

My thanks once again to Anthony Harrison for sitting down with me on the podcast. He's an amazing advocate for BU and personally I feel very lucky to have gotten to know him as he's been a member of the BU Alumni Council. If you're interested in connecting with Anthony yourself, you can find him on the BU Career Advisory Network. Visit bu.edu/alumni/can. I also encourage everybody to read a recent profile of Anthony on BU Today called "Diversifying Silicon Valley." You can find a link for the article in the show notes of this episode.

