

Bruce Olsen



b. 1939

Education: BA, BYU, 1963 ; MA communications, BYU, 1965

Job Position in 2006: Managing director for the Public Affairs Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Family: He and his wife, Christine Payne Olsen, are the parents of five children.

Awards and Honors: Bruce L. Olsen is currently president-elect of the 350,000-member BYU Alumni Association and immediate past president of the BYU Student Officers Society. He has been honored to give the Legacy Lecture at the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) College of Fellows National Convention. He is also a recipient of the Franklin S. Harris Award at BYU.

Career and Brief Bio: Bruce L. Olsen has served as the managing director for the Public Affairs Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for the past seventeen years. He directs worldwide offices in eleven countries and domestic offices in Washington DC, New York, and Los Angeles. He is also responsible for government affairs, community relations, interfaith, and media relations programs.

He has served as director of corporate communications for Geneva Steel (Orem, UT) and as associate professor (Communications Department), assistant dean, registrar, and assistant to the president for university relations at BYU.

He has served in many Church positions, including president of the Massachusetts Boston Mission (1982–85), a member of the Young Men General Board, stake president, and bishop.

Questions and Comments:

What Websites or publications would you recommend for those interested in public relations?

Someone interested in public relations should be familiar with the Church Website. We have a new Website in our department called Newsroom, which we change almost daily. There has recently been a major redesign of the whole thing, so we can now use audio and video as well as print. It's designed for the news media, but we find that a lot of members of the Church like to check it to get the Church's point of view on various subjects; so it's a good site for those looking into this field. There are a number of professional Websites they could look at for journalism and public relations, specifically the Public Relations Society of America.

Is there anything you consider a must read, see, or hear in the public relations field for a student who is planning on going into it?

They should be a member of a Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), which is sponsored by the Public Relations Society of America. We've had some excellent publications from students who are members of PRSSA in newspapers and two or three other professional publications. The PRSSA is very helpful in getting the feel for public relations.

Is there anybody students should look to as a mentor in the field of public relations?

A mentor is someone who takes a personal interest in the student and spends time with them. The Church's Public Affairs staff has a combination of about forty-five people here in Salt Lake City, along with people in New York, Washington DC, and fourteen other countries who are willing to be mentors. I think a student, wherever they are in the world, can correspond through email or the telephone to have an association with these people, a personal one if possible. I have a couple of nonmembers that I mentor through the Public Relations Society of America. It's amazing how much information you can get with a short email or a brief telephone conversation.

What advice would you give to an upcoming student, particularly about achieving success in the world?

The first thing I would look at is getting a good, strong foundation. It's good to be broad. I think BYU does a great job at giving a broad education through the general education classes they require. When students get into the field, they need to get a background in public relations. I have the opportunity to interview and hire people from time to time here at Church headquarters, and the one who always has an edge is the one who has an educational background in public relations. A lot of people from various other fields are interested in public relations, but those who really have the ability to make a long-range contribution and grow in the profession are those who get a good education first, then go out for experience.

Experience can come in the corporate area or through an agency. I would recommend agency work for four or five years because you work with so many different clients and circumstances. When you go on to corporate public relations, which is more stable, has better hours, and is easier on your family, you have broad experience that will allow you to make contributions and bring some outside experience to the organization.

What has brought you the most happiness and satisfaction in your career?

Public relations work is usually a series of events, projects, challenges, and circumstances that have to deal with the media and other organizations. I suppose the thing that has brought me the greatest satisfaction is creating an idea that becomes a project, which then becomes successful and has an impact in the long run by helping people understand. In my case, either at BYU or with the Church, where I've spent most of my professional life, I don't quite see the outcome for a number of months or even years. However, sometimes when you handle circumstances and interviews, you have the feeling almost immediately that it is successful and is going to have an impact.

Recently, President Hinckley was interviewed by Helen Whitney, who is doing a four-hour documentary on the Church. When President Hinckley was through he immediately asked me how he did and how I felt about how he answered "three questions and about forty-nine others." I told him we would have stopped and redone it if he hadn't done a first-class job, which he always does.

What frustrates you the most?

I find dealing with the media particularly frustrating, especially when they come with a story already written and a point of view that's already negative about the Church or BYU. If they give me a level playing ground, let me answer the questions and treat my answers fairly, then I feel good about the media; but when they come with a story written, looking for a couple of quotes to go in it, it frustrates me a lot.

How has being an active member of the Church affected your working field, not here at the Church office, but in Geneva and other places?

There is no doubt the Church gives you a foundation for everything you do and for every judgment you have to make, each page of your life. I feel like being a Church member has really shaped everything I do and say. It has given me a framework on which to weigh various circumstances dealing with integrity, honesty, and doing the right thing for the right reason. Because of these circumstances, I value both the Church and my BYU education.

How and why did you choose to work in public relations?

That is a very good question; in hindsight you see the hand of the Lord, but at the time, sometimes you're trying to work beside yourself and you're not too sure. I had gone to a junior college in Price a few years before my mission, and when I came back I asked BYU to evaluate my transcript to see if I could get a degree in journalism or secondary education to be a high school principal. While on my mission in California, I met a lot of members who were principals of high schools. I was impressed with them and thought it might be something I would like to do. When BYU sent my transcript back, they ignored the education part of it, which I found out later was a master's degree, and placed me into journalism classes, which I really liked. I ended up being the editor of the *Universe*, which gave me a feel for public relations, where I wouldn't have otherwise had that opportunity. The Lord wanted me where I am, and he put me in the courses that prepared me for that. As a student, I worked in what they used to call "Nuclear"—under Ed Butterworth—during my undergraduate and graduate school years. All of those things helped shape and prepare me for the public relations profession.

I went into Admissions and Records for a while. I was the associate dean and then the director of Admissions and School of Relations. I became assistant to President Dallin H. Oaks for seven years and President Jeffrey R. Holland for two years. I really got my teeth into the profession at that point—before then I just had administration experience. This put me on the front line working with the media and major university events. That position led me to the job I have right now at Church headquarters.

Any other general advice for students?

Students going into the public relations field need to learn to write, like to write, and have the discipline of learning to write like a journalist. In this day and age, students must keep abreast in the media. This used to be how able you were on the computer, but now it's much broader than that. There are so many things happening with technology, such as Web 2.0, where there really is a world wide conversation taking place. You have to learn how to enter into conversations and how to contribute in logical ways that help people see that you are founded and well reasoned. Show that you can make a difference in speaking up for the things you really believe in.

Blogging, a recent technology change, is a way of life now and is a great resource. Major corporations are using it as a way to communicate, specifically, the vice presidents of General Motors. I think the day will come when even members of the Twelve Apostles will use the blog as a major communication tool in their administration; this is not far away, but it'll probably be different than the way blogs are now.

It's amazing how much change has occurred in the past few years. For example, some of my colleagues came up with the idea to bring stories to the reporter's minds because right now we are really hostages to what they think and feel. We have to understand how they do and view things; even editors who get hold of their stories often change them or force them to the back. With Church pieces, Helen Whitney has received a lot of pressure to make the documentary more negative than she wants to make it. So we came up with an idea where we actually interview General Authorities on touchy, sensitive, difficult subjects and then write entire pieces about them. However, they do have the chance to edit if they have misspoken themselves. Elder Dallin H. Oaks and Elder Lance B. Wickman did a piece on same- gender marriage and same-gender attraction that has been extremely well received. Elder Holland and Elder Marlin Jensen have recently finished one about polygamy, which we haven't published yet. Polygamy is a subject where you can misspeak yourself very easily, and a lot of members and nonmembers of the Church don't understand it. Through the Church's Website we are able to post our side of the story in our own terms, without filters and pressures. Interestingly enough, the news media has accepted it rather well and are very complimentary about it.