

Fordham Footsteps Podcast Interview: Samara Finn Holland, FCLC '03

- Matt: Welcome to Fordham Footsteps, the podcast that features Fordham alumni and discusses their path from their time as a student to their current career. Some will have a direct correlation to their majors, and others will describe how they took some unexpected turns.
- Sara: Either way, expect an insider's guide to certain industries and some great stories from our esteemed alumni.
- Matt: I'm Matt Burns, Associate Director for Young Alumni and Student Engagement.
- Sara: And I'm Sara Hunt Munoz, Senior Director for Strategic Initiatives. With us today is Samara Finn Holland, Fordham College at Lincoln Center class of '03. Welcome, Samara.
- Samara: Thank you so much.
- Matt: Yeah, thanks for being here. So Samara, BA in communications, correct? Communications and media studies?
- Samara: Yes.
- Matt: What do you do now?
- Samara: Right now, I'm a senior vice president at Kaplow Communications, and my focus is on leading their influencer marketing efforts.
- Sara: When you were a communications student, what sort of things did you want to get into then? What were your career aspirations?
- Samara: At the time, I always knew communications was for me. For a while I thought I would go the journalism route and then I decided, "Oh, writing all the time. I like to write, but I don't know if I want to do that 100% of the time." And then I sort of learned about public relations, took some classes even in high school, and thought that it was a creative industry that would still allow me to use writing skills, would still allow me to make connections with people. What I loved about it was that kind of everything has PR. I mean, Fordham has alumni relations and PR. Hospitals have PR. People have PR. So I thought that no matter where maybe my passions led me in the future, there would always be a public relations position that could fit my skills.
- Matt: You graduated with that degree. What did you do?

Samara: I was fortunate enough to do many internships while I was at Fordham. I feel that that's probably a common path students take. One of my internships that I had had about a year prior to graduating, I had reconnected with staffers that I reported into, let them know that I was about to graduate to see if they had any open positions. I was still keeping my options open, applying to any job that I saw. But I was fortunate that in the end, a place I had interned had a position open for me.

Samara: One thing I think it was really challenging was you start to see friends who might be business majors and they know a year ahead that they have a job and they know exactly where they're going after graduation. And really for communications is such a realtime industry, even sending out resumes and April didn't do much. It wasn't until the week of graduation and I was finally getting some traction. So I think you need to be a little patient depending on your industry and know that you might not know before graduation what's happening, but as soon as you're available to enter the workforce, there'll be opportunities to kind of pursue them.

Matt: 2003, social media is still relatively in its infancy, right? How did you narrow down looking at influencer culture in the work you do now?

Samara: Yeah, it was really a natural progression for me just because I was passionate about the digital space while it was emerging. And so on the traditional public relations side, as publications started to go digital and web continued to grow, there was a lot more opportunities for just media relations and pitching stories and getting your client's coverage in the digital space.

Samara: I actually credit another alum that I met post-Fordham for a little bit of inspiration, getting further into the social media field, Charlie O'Donnell. I met him on the Young Alumni Committee. Didn't know him when I was a student, but as an alum, met him. He was more involved in the finance space, but he started a blog right when blogs started. And on his blog, he talked a lot about digital advancements and social media. So when Charlie joined Twitter, I joined Twitter. When Charlie got a blog, I started watching blogs. When he said how to set up an RSS feed, I set up an RSS feed.

Samara: I was also able, I think at that point, to identify where the communications industry was going and what our client needs were, and as I wanted to grow in a company and continue to move up the ladder, I saw that there was a senior executive who was focused on creating a social media team at the agency I was working at, and so I sort of formed an alliance with her, tried to get myself into that department because of that personal passion that existed.

Samara: From there, I always joke and say we were a social media team, but we were only doing influencer relations and influencer activations, and I think that has to do with clients. They saw working with bloggers as an extension of what they knew PR and communications to be, whereas Wikipedia and YouTube video, that was still a little outside of what they were focusing on from a PR perspective. So started working with influencers, built a lot of really deep relationships, was able to build a practice at the agency I was at and just continue to stay in that industry, as quite frankly, it's exploded in the last few years.

Sara: What are some of the campaigns that you've worked on that have been most fulfilling for you?

Samara: I love that my background has really spanned everything from health and wellness to a lot of work in beauty and consumer lifestyle. Working with COVERGIRL was an amazing part of my history and working on such an empowering beauty brand and working with influencers, was part of the team that launched James Charles as the first ever male COVERGIRL ambassador, so that was pretty breakthrough, but equally, working on women's health issues and working with Merck for Mothers on some of their campaigns has been enjoyable.

Matt: Can you explain as the industry professional, what is an influencer?

Samara: Yeah. I mean, I like to think of a very broad definition of influencer, and I like to think that anyone that has the power to impact perception or behavior change is an influencer. I think in today's world, that often draws directly to online since consumers are spending so much time there and kind of the way influencers are most actively referred to are digital content creators, so your YouTube stars, your bloggers, your Instagrammers, your TikTokers, your Twitchers. As every platform evolves, there's a new sort of group of influencers that rises to the top.

Sara: What's a typical day like for you, or is there not a typical day?

Samara: There's not a typical day because it's always different. But I would say there are things that happen every single day. Problem solving every single day. You're dealing with people. It's a human-to-human industry, so things don't always go according to plan. I think relationship building, also very key. And I guess lastly, the creativity piece. You're always brainstorming a new idea, a new concept, a new activation. So there's a lot of that type of creative juices flowing on a daily basis.

Matt: Was there anything particular in your Fordham education that informed the sort of work you do?

Samara: I think that it informs more of the way that I approach how I act in the workplace maybe more than directly the work itself. So I really like to take time to mentor students. I'm the kind of colleague that my peers and senior executives can really count on, anytime there's an opportunity to build a collaborative culture in the workplace. I really think that ... I like to say work hard, be nice, and I think that when you think of men and women for others and giving back, I think that those sort of Jesuit ideals have shaped how I want to make an impact maybe no matter where I'm working.

Sara: What about your coursework? Any of the classes that you took at Fordham directly correlate with the work you're doing now?

Samara: I think they all do in one way or another. Even though I say I didn't study influencer marketing at Fordham, I learned how to think, how to think critically, how to problem solve, how to approach different situations. And I think in the communications track, I

took public relations, I took advertising, I took public speaking, which I think is really important with the work I do every day. So those different, I think, courses tend to rise to the top when I think about my day-to-day work.

Sara: What's next?

Samara: What's next for me or what's next for the industry?

Sara: Both.

Samara: I don't know. I think it's really hard to plan for what's next. I think my career has taken different turns and they haven't always been planned. The first job I had that came from that internship that I had had, that company closed within a year. I thought I was going to be there forever and then a year into my position, the CEO walks in one day and says, "In three months we're closing. Feel free to interview. We're happy to serve as a reference." I wound up then going to another company where one of my current colleagues was also interviewing with, so we both kind of went there. At the time, I needed another job. I needed to pay my rent. I wasn't really thinking so much about the future, and I spent more than 13 and a half years at that agency.

Sara: Oh wow.

Samara: And so now I'm at Capitol Communications, which is a wonderful integrated communications agency that really focuses on that culture piece, which has been way more important to me these days I think than the actual work that I'm doing, but just being in an environment that fosters positivity and respect and trust is really important. I would say I think my next endeavor probably won't be in the agency space. I do think I'd like to explore either nonprofit or going in-house somewhere, but just never know.

Sara: When you were at that other agency for 13 years, what made you decide to move on?

Samara: I think the organization was going through some change and I was going through a lot of change personally, too. I had been married for a few years. I was looking for a little more flexibility, time to be with my family, time to be able to help out with my grandparents, and just looking for an environment that would allow that a little more easily. I was also looking to take some time off, so I took a few months off, which I think is also a little unexpected, but I think in today's environment, across all industries, with technology and with this always on culture, there are times where you need to kind of pump the brakes and take a minute for yourself and rejuvenate. And that was incredibly beneficial to go into the next step.

Sara: And didn't you do something on that time off? Didn't you get your project management license?

Samara: I did. So I had started that while I was still at my previous company. I kind of had that itch, like, "Do I go back to school and get a master's? I really like to learn. I'm learning with what I'm doing, but I'm not learning something else that's getting a different part

of my brain to think." And so I kind of started hearing more about project management. I kind of thought, "Hey, I know how to project manage. I'm doing that every single day. But let me see what that really means." And I liked that it was a shorter term commitment. You take classes, you prep for a test, you get your certification, and then you continue the learning and education process in order to keep your certification, so that-

Matt: So no all-nighters, no any of those fun things you missed from college.

Samara: Exactly, exactly. And I knew that I was making a six to nine month commitment versus a two to four to six year commitment.

Sara: Well, any advice for media and communication majors now about what they should be doing while they think about their future career?

Samara: I think, and this could probably apply to many different industries, but specifically communications as you think about social media and the digital landscape, you have to constantly be curious, curious about the industry, curious about the evolution, curious about the people in the industry, in jobs that you're looking at. I think from a networking perspective, just getting out to industry events, getting out to, it could be Fordham events or alumni events where you're able to exchange ideas and meet other people, but also maintaining that level of curiosity across any path that you're taking online. Start following different creators or different influencers or different media outlets if you're going more of a journalistic route. I think that the way you can naturally consume something that's important to you will play out in your professional career and help educate you in a different way.

Sara: Gotcha. It sounds like internships are also important because they really helped you. It sounds like mentorship is important because you mentor people and it sounds like you've used people within your space as mentors and it sounds like you've had a really great career.

Samara: I mean, being in the city gives you so many opportunities, but I think it's just as important to use internships to find out something you don't like as well as something you do like, because I thought I wanted to go into the celebrity public relations route. So I had gotten some other maybe easier internships under my belt and then I still remember ... I mean, not to date myself, but going to the library at the Lincoln Center Campus and taking the Internship Bible and finding the celebrity PR agency that was founded by three female founders and I was like, "This is what I want to do. I got to get this internship," and I did get it and then I was like, "Holy cow, this is not what I wanted."

Sara: Oh wow. Okay.

Samara: There was some exciting moments. There was some high pressure moments. But for me, it wasn't even so much the industry. It was more the organization. You kind of have assistants and you have publicists and so to get from that more crazy entry level role to

a more senior role can take 10 years. And I was like, "I need more mobility. I need to be in an environment that's more like an agency where every few years, you're getting to the next level and there's constantly something to reach for."

Sara: To strive for, yeah.

Matt: And how important is having a mentor? I ask that – plug for the Fordham mentoring program – but Samara has been a mentor for years. How important is that role model or that kind of figure in your life?

Samara: For me, it's always been critically important. There are certain conversations that you're just not going to be comfortable having in a more public forum or even in an internet forum, whether it comes to having candid conversations about compensation, whether it comes to challenging workplace situations. Even today, there's so many people through all of my different journeys at Fordham and beyond that I continue to stay in touch with and I continue to seek out that guidance from, because I think that even though their experience might be different, even though today's students are growing up with technology as such an integrated part of their lives and social media, I still think there's so much you can take from getting that inside peek into someone else's experience.

Matt: Sure.

Sara: Absolutely.

Matt: Well, Samara, I think that's all we have for you. Thank you so much for taking the time to share your experience and insight.

Samara: Great. Thanks for having me.

Matt: Well, that's another edition of Fordham Footsteps. Fordham Footsteps is brought to you by the Fordham University Alumni Association.

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