



VIEWS & VISIONS

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Create a Best Place to Work, Create a Workforce for Tomorrow

Neil Mortine, President and CEO
Fahlgren Mortine

Neil Mortine is president and CEO of Fahlgren Mortine, one of the largest independently owned marketing and communications firms in the country. His more than 30 years of corporate communications and brand marketing management experience has been at a full-service agency serving notable brands, including McDonald's, Kroger, Emerson, Cardinal Health, Office of TourismOhio, Nationwide Children's Hospital, and many more.

Under Mr. Mortine's leadership, Fahlgren Mortine has been named the Bulldog Reporter's 2011 and 2012 Agency of the Year, a finalist for PRWeek's 2012 Agency of the Year, the Association of Fundraising Professionals' Fundraiser of the Year and has received recognition as a Best Place to Work by PR News and Columbus CEO.

Mr. Mortine was a finalist for PRWeek's PR Professional of the Year in 2013, and has been named to the Smart Business Columbus Power 100 the past four years. He also was recognized by the Central Ohio Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America with an award for outstanding service to PRSSA in 2006 and with its PR Practitioner of the Year Award in 2013.

He holds a bachelor's degree in journalism/public relations from The Ohio State University.

I am convinced that great culture attracts the best people, and the best people attract the best clients.

As a leader of a marketing and communications agency, it is my responsibility to develop tomorrow's workforce, and in doing so, our company's future growth. In order to have our company withstand the test of time, I believe the most effective starting point is fostering a culture in which our people are offered opportunities to grow while having access to opportunities to have a little fun along the way.

Establish a Model for Success

We took an in-depth look at our agency and its structure just a few years ago. Through research and our own experiences, we could tell the lines among public relations, advertising and digital were blurring. After careful research and planning, Fahlgren Mortine became one of few agencies at the time to adopt an integrated model that eliminated business unit silos.

The new model allowed us to break down barriers from collaborating among disciplines and offered a better experience for our people and our clients. We sensed early on an evolution of what our best employees – and most desired recruits – were seeking in a marketing and communications career. It was exposure to all disciplines and the ability to learn outside the industry standard



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boundaries put around their knowledge base. Through our annual client satisfaction survey, we knew our clients didn't care if we brought them public relations, advertising or digital solutions; rather, they just wanted the best channel-agnostic solution that would help them attain their goals.

Noticing a shift in what tomorrow's workforce meant for our industry early on has been extremely beneficial to our bottom line and attracting and retaining talented professionals and, in doing so, attracting and retaining great clients. The only reason this was possible is because we had created a culture with our employees and clients where we could openly solicit and actually receive meaningful feedback, provide a stable outlook amid a lot of change, and ultimately rally both key audiences around the cause we were proposing for the future of our business.

Never Underestimate the Value of Culture

When working in a fast-paced, deadline-driven environment such as ours, it is important to offer opportunities for individuals to learn from one another outside of a formal business setting. We celebrate traditional and odd holidays with the same enthusiasm, be it St. Patrick's Day, Halloween, Squirrel Appreciation Day, Festivus or a miniature golf tournament throughout the office.

While a corn-eating contest might seem like a distraction, monthly celebrations such as this keep morale at Fahlgren Mortine high, allowing associates to perform their best work on behalf of clients.

I believe our emphasis on culture proved extremely beneficial when we acquired three companies in 2010, as well as when we made the business model transformations I've mentioned. This was a great deal of change for our team members in a short period of time, but with our policy of open and honest communication and by providing several opportunities for all to get more acquainted, we found our people adjusted as seamlessly as possible through the transition.

Another key factor in our culture is our philanthropic spirit. We've made it a practice to give back to communities in which we live and work and, rather than pick a company-wide cause, we encourage employees to contribute to organizations and causes about which they are passionate. We've found the most beneficial service we can provide to organizations with limited marketing budgets is the expertise and assistance of our marketing and communications professionals in getting valuable messages about the organizations' missions to their target audiences. We provide company time, including creative planning, creative execution, writing and counseling services – as well as monetary donations – to a wide variety of organizations with which our people are personally connected, including organizations dedicated to fighting hunger, supporting the arts, cancer research, children's programs and a myriad of other causes. We've found this practice to deliver results in two ways: it increases employee satisfaction and, because of the passion behind the effort, we often see excellent outcomes for these causes.

Invest in People

Now in our 51st year, we've created tomorrow's workforce a time or two. During our time in business, we have seen advances in technology (computers, the decline of newspapers, the Internet, social media, mobile) that have completely changed how we operate. In this ever-changing marketing and communications industry, professional development is paramount, and because of this we have a long-standing tradition of empowering employees to stay up-to-date.

In late 2011, we took professional development a step further and created Fahlgren Mortine University (FMU), a program designed to provide formal in-house training. Courses are designed to provide growth and education opportunities, from understanding Fahlgren Mortine processes and ever-expanding capabilities and best practices, to courses that help develop leadership skills. The program has been positively received by Fahlgren Mortine employees, and we have invested more than 1,700 hours in the program to date.

We put such an emphasis on professional development in order to retain and mold the leaders we need to run the agency, and our operating philosophy also supports that goal. To facilitate open lines of communication between associates and executives, the agency has held twice-yearly performance reviews and annual client health assessments for several years, and Fahlgren Mortine employees are often trusted with responsibility earlier in their

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From top: Halloween, October 2012; Corn-eating contest, August 2012; Pie-eating contest, June 2012; and Fahlgren Mortine's Peleton at Pelotonia, August 2012

Developing New Career Pathways in Manufacturing

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Further, we need to recruit and train additional qualified K-12 STEM teachers throughout the United States.

- Support innovative STEM education programs in middle school and high school, such as Project Lead the Way (PLTW), which engage students in hands-on, project-based learning and expose them to STEM fields through local industry professionals and real-world workplace experiences.
- Focus federal resources on education and workforce development programs that:
 - result in a nationally portable, industry-recognized credentialed program (such as Toyota's AMT program);
 - emphasize the development of the next-generation skilled worker

through multi-skill technical training, as well as non-technical competencies, such as verbal and written communication;

- encourage coordination between community colleges and local employers to help ensure that the curriculum meets the local employment needs; and,
- strengthen and improve career and technical education programs in the United States, so that they produce graduates with world-class skills and capabilities, who do not require extensive "up-skilling" when hired.

We clearly recognize the budget challenges facing our nation. However, we believe many of these recommendations can be accomplished by a shift in emphasis among existing workforce development funds on the federal, state and local levels. Simply put, America's focus for some time now has been on the idea that everyone needs

to go to college and get a generalist four-year degree. The benefits of this focus, as great as they are, do not necessarily accrue to the manufacturing sector. Our talent pool of skilled technicians has declined precipitously and it needs to be replaced if America is going to compete in the global manufacturing marketplace. Four-year degrees per se are not the issue – and we need skilled bachelor's degree graduates as well. However, the balance of technical and other training is critical. That is why, for example, the Toyota AMT program provides for a two-year associate degree, with a defined pathway to continue, if desired, to get a four-year bachelor's degree in engineering from a state college or university.

In summary, for manufacturing to compete in the global marketplace, our students need to be ready, willing and able to take on the manufacturing career challenges in the future that will keep U.S. manufacturing as a global leader. ▽



Operation Feed finale, April 2012

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careers than in similar environments. It's a key strategy in our effort to ensure top employees are invested in our business. We empower folks to act with a sense of urgency and give them a sense of freedom and authority to take action and influence change. With the right training and the opportunity to grow, our people are able to flourish.

It's All Worthwhile

We're proud to have had outstanding leaders stay with our firm for 10, 20 or even 30 years or more. It is the sense of inclusiveness, as well as the promise of a challenging, interesting place to work that keeps our high-achieving, highly valued team members around. Our regular employee satisfaction surveys tell us our associates value our emphasis on culture and professional development.

Creating a best place to work is a challenge, but it comes with great payoffs. With the right amount of hard work, the continual fostering of growth and development, and a chance to relieve some of the pressure those two invariably create, we plan to be successful for years to come. ▽