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Communicating with Students Via E-mail: Creating No Excuse for “There’s Nothing to Do On Campus”

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Honors Presentation: RhodyWire
Tuesday, May 1, 2007

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

Communicating with students via e-mail:

Creating no excuse for "There's nothing to do on campus"



Jessica Rusack
Faculty sponsor:
Dr. Barbara F. Luebke, Journalism

Good morning. Thank you for coming today. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Jessica Rusack. Obviously I am a senior, graduating in 19 days with degrees in Public Relations and Spanish.

I'd like to introduce my faculty advisor, Dr. Barbara Luebke. Dr. Luebke's help throughout my project has been invaluable.

Today I will be presenting my senior honors project: **Communicating with students via e-mail: Creating no excuse for "There's nothing to do on campus"**

I'd like to begin by briefly sharing with you some key moments in the past four years that have led me to choose the topic for my honors project.

When I was in high school, I didn't have an e-mail account. So when I came to URI my freshman year, checking my e-mail became a part of my daily routine.

I'd wake up every morning – check my e-mail. Go to my room between classes – check my e-mail. Get ready for bed – check my e-mail. As you can imagine, checking my e-mail became second-nature.

Fast forward a year to my sophomore year when I was a Resident Assistant when I'd constantly hear from residents the infamous complaint that there's nothing to do on campus. Contrary to their beliefs, there actually was and still is plenty happening on campus.

At this time I joined the Student Alumni Association or SAA and learned first-hand how difficult it is to promote events with traditional advertising like fliers, handouts and ads in the newspaper. I realized that students had become somewhat immune to the overwhelming amount of advertising that they see everyday.

Fast forward a year to the summer after my junior year. Intern at North Star Marketing in NK. And I worked frequently with an e-mail marketing platform. Saw how mass e-mails were created for clients to send to their customer database. I got hands-on experience and begin to learn the ins and outs of e-mail marketing.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

Problem

- No way for organizations to connect with students electronically
- Students complaining
- Campus over-saturated with paper advertising materials



Throughout these experiences I kept wondering: *why aren't student organizations using e-mail to communicate with students?*

As a Public Relations major, I saw this as a PR problem, a challenge and most of all, an opportunity. Not only was there no electronic outlet for student organizations to promote their events, but students were also complaining about the lack of things to do at URI. Something needed to be done.

Now I'd like to ask you a question...**How many of you get at least one e-mail newsletter in your inbox every weekday morning? I get about six every day. I get The New York Times, job listings from Monster and MonsterTrak, The Good Five Cent Cigar, and The New York Times' UrbanEye just to name a few. They just keep coming and I keep signing up for them. So it isn't hard to recognize that e-mail and the internet have become integral parts of our lives.**

In fact, a survey conducted by EmailLabs, a leader in e-mail marketing solutions, recorded 83.2% of marketers said e-mail marketing is their most important advertising tactic for 2007. Only 36.2% said that display ads were most important to their business.

The internet is the fastest growing medium in Public Relations. In the past year I've attended two PR conferences, and speakers at both events made it very clear that blogging, e-mail and online communities are the future of PR.

So at this point, you're probably itching to know (if you don't already) what I did for my honors project. Well, wait no longer.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

Solution

RhodyWire – a weekly e-mail newsletter students can opt-in to receive. RhodyWire lists what's happening on campus every day.

For my honors project, I took it upon myself, with the help of the URI student-run PR agency, Rhody & Co., to find a solution to this problem. What was needed was a free outlet for student groups and on-campus departments to promote their events to students via e-mail.

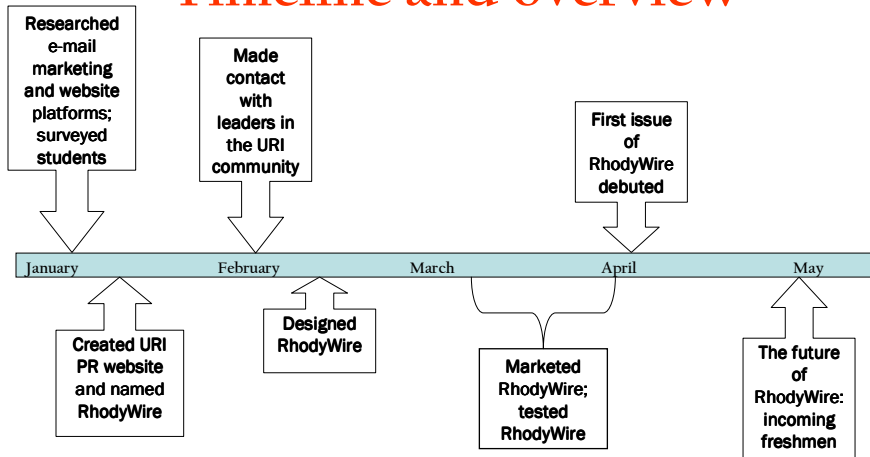
This is when ENTER? RhodyWire was born, a weekly e-mail newsletter that students can opt-in to receive at www.uripr.org, the website of URI's student-run PR agency, Rhody & Co. RhodyWire lists what's happening at URI every week and is sent to students every Monday morning.

Public Relations is all about free publicity. RhodyWire gives student groups free publicity and keeps URI students informed at the same time.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

Timeline and overview



Brief overview of what I'll be talking about today and a timeline showing you the steps I took in creating RhodyWire.

- January - Preliminary research to find out the best web server for the project. I also surveyed students to see if RhodyWire would be useful to them.
- Late January, early February – Began creating the URI PR website and named the e-mail newsletter RhodyWire
- February – made initial contact with student organizations to get them on board with RhodyWire and let them know that we wanted to help promote their events.
- Mid-February – RhodyWire was created and the layout and design was finalized
- March & April – Marketing and PR began for RhodyWire. This is also when I began testing RhodyWire.
- April 2, 2007 – RhodyWire debuted to almost 350 students and members of the URI community
- Today, May 1st – brings the future of RhodyWire and the task of getting the word out to incoming students.

Research

1. **What platform should I use to create the e-newsletter?**
2. **Will students respond well to the idea of a weekly e-mail newsletter?**

RESEARCH & SURVEYING THE AUDIENCE

Prior to creating RhodyWire, I needed to research two things:

1. What platform to use to create the e-newsletter
2. If students would respond well to the idea of a weekly e-mail newsletter

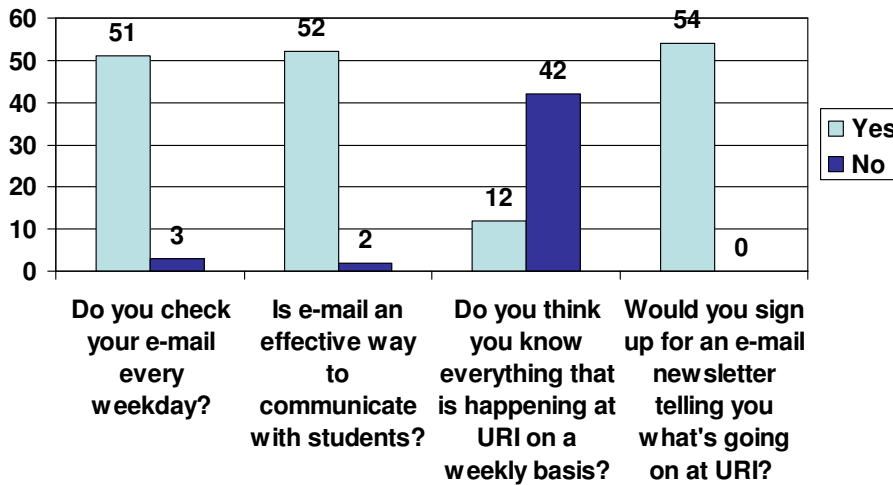
To determine what program to use, I searched online for e-mail marketing solutions. Most e-mail marketing tools that I came across were hundreds of dollars, required contracts or didn't have the capabilities we wanted for the newsletter.

One day, I was editing a website for another organization and I decided to check out what packages they offered for website design. Turned out, their business package came with an e-mail marketing tool. The package was affordable and had everything Rhody & Co. needed to design their website and to distribute RhodyWire.

The second question that needed research was if students would respond well to the idea of RhodyWire. So I created a survey – sent it to 150 students. Out of 150, 54 responded.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

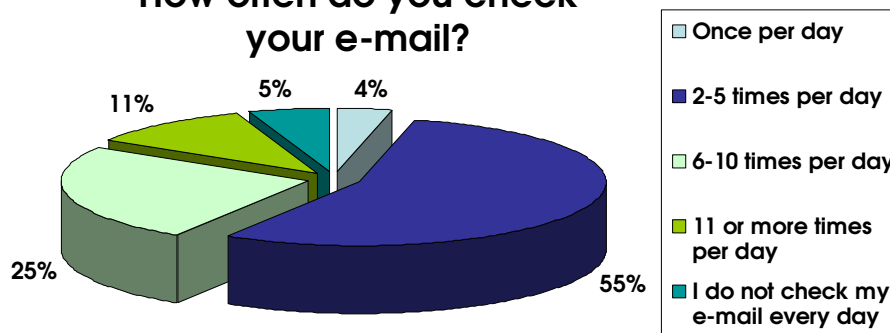


This graph shows the answers to some of the questions in the survey. From the information gathered from the survey, it was easy to conclude that students are checking their e-mail everyday; they think e-mail is an effective way of communication; and they would opt-in to receive an e-mail newsletter like RhodyWire. More than 75% of students don't think they know everything that's going on at URI on a weekly basis.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

How often do you check your e-mail?



91% of students surveyed check their e-mail more than once everyday which increases the chance of students opening RhodyWire.

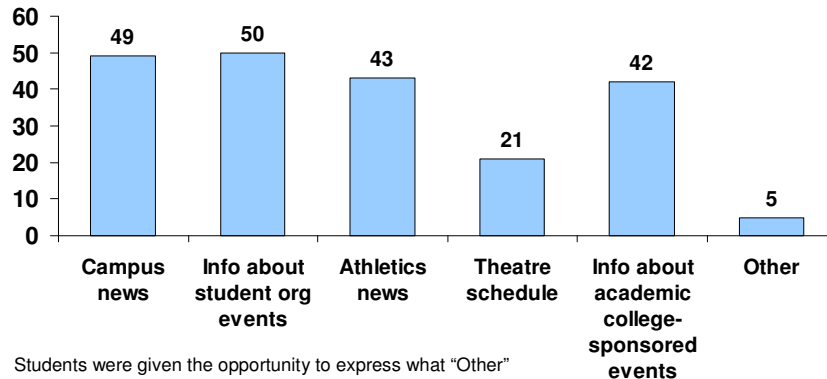
Furthermore, when asked how often they check their e-mail, 91% responded that they check their e-mail more than once everyday. This increases the

chance that students will open RhodyWire since more than half of students check their e-mail 2-5 times per day.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

What type of information would you want to receive in a URI e-mail newsletter?



Students were given the opportunity to express what "Other" information they would want to receive. Responses included dining hall menus and information about off-campus events.

The final question of the survey asked students what type of information they would want included in a newsletter like RhodyWire. Campus news, information about student organization-sponsored events, athletic news and information about academic-sponsored events are what students want to know about the most. The responses gathered from the "other" category included students wanting more information about dining hall menus and off-campus events.

All-in-all, the survey confirmed that students would respond well to a weekly e-mail newsletter and that students are frequently using e-mail as a major source of information in their day-to-day lives.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

The URI PR website

- Rhody & Co, PRS & RhodyWire:
www.uripr.org
- Students opt-in to receive RhodyWire
- Event form for organizations and departments
 - Enter event info or announcements

So the creation of RhodyWire continued. But before I could create the actual newsletter, the Rhody & Co. website had to be designed. On the website, students can opt-in to receive RhodyWire and student organizations can fill out a form to include their events on RhodyWire.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

Reaching out to the URI community

- Initial contact
 - Student organizations
 - On-campus departments
- [Online](#) database
- Campus calendars



After the creation of the website, it was time to get support from the community and let organizations know about RhodyWire. So we made initial contact with student organizations by sending them a mock RhodyWire personalized to the president of their organization. It explained what RhodyWire is, the newsletter's purpose, and that organizations could enter their information into the RhodyWire database by going to our

website. We also used the campus calendar to make sure RhodyWire's content was complete. This is what the online database looks like and what information the form captures.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

RhodyWire layout & design

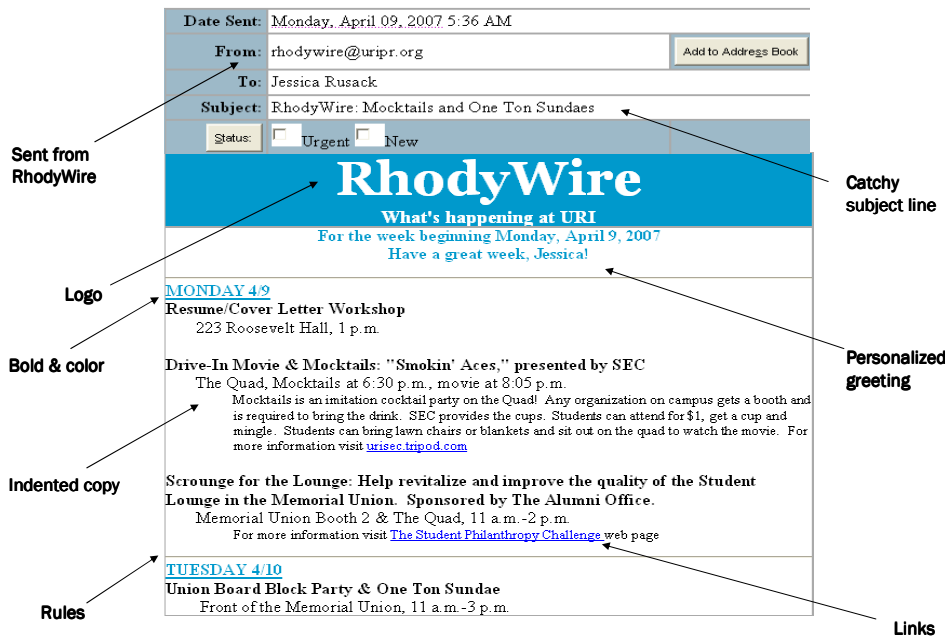
- Tried different logos
- Wanted to include pictures
- Led to UBE challenge

To:	Jessica Rusack
Subject:	[UBE?] RhodyWire: Week of March

Layout and Design

On to the design – toyed around with different logos. Wanted a picture of Rhody or a wire in the logo. Also wanted to include pictures in the body of RhodyWire. Once attempted this, learned that the subject line of the e-mail included a UBE. Don't ask me what that stands for. But in WebMail speak – it's spam. And as soon as I see a UBE – I delete it. And that's what I knew other students would do immediately upon seeing a UBE in their inbox. So I nixed the photos, logo and anything that led to a UBE.

This is what I finally came up with...



As you can see from this issue of RhodyWire, the design is simple. The name “RhodyWire” is branded in the Georgia font, which we’ve used in most of our advertising. The blue and white are obviously URI’s colors. The “What’s happening at URI” sub headline lets the reader know what RhodyWire is.

The bolded and blue type identifies the day of the week and provides contrast.

The indented text that gradually gets smaller makes it easier to read and shows the reader what information is most important.

The rules package the information on each day of the week and tell the reader’s eye when to stop processing Monday’s information and move on to Tuesday’s.

The personalized greeting is refreshing amidst the rest of the e-mail we all get everyday. It is nice to open RhodyWire on a Monday morning and see the personalized wishes for a great week.

The links in the subtext of some of the events gives the reader a way of learning more about the event. They also provide contrast to the newsletter.

When subscribers see RhodyWire in their inbox they see two things. First, they see that the sender is RhodyWire not University staff which is something we often get and are prone to delete. And second, subscribers see the catchy subject line that should motivate them to open the e-mail.

Pride and Prejudice presented by URI Theatre
Fine Arts Center, 3:00 p.m., \$8 for students. For more information visit
<http://www.uri.edu/artsci/the/season.html>

Reminders

- **SENIORS!** Get your yearbook picture taken this Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday if you haven't already. Go to www.ouryear.com and enter URI's school code (294) to make an appointment.
- **Know someone who's graduating?** Congratulate them with roses. Pre-purchase your roses from SAA and save yourself the hassle of buying flowers the day of graduation. Go to www.urisaa.org to order now.

Links

[URI News](#) [The Cigar](#) [Athletics](#) [Dining Halls](#) [RhodyNation](#)

RhodyWire is brought to you by Rhody & Co., URI's student-run PR agency.
To learn more about RhodyWire or Rhody & Co. visit www.uripi.org
If you are unable to view this e-mail, click [here](#).
Click [here](#) to unsubscribe.

RhodyWire also has special sections for Reminders (things that aren't events but are important for students to remember) and a section for links which addresses their desires to know information like dining hall menus and information about athletics.

After designing RhodyWire, I thought everything was set. All I needed was for students to start signing up and the rest was just creating and distributing RhodyWire.

But what would a project be without challenges?

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

- **Challenge:** RhodyWire competition?
 - In March, learned about an e-newsletter organized by SPO (the Student Programming Office)
- **Solution:** Met with SPO intern
 - Their newsletter distributed monthly to the presidents of student organizations
 - Different audience, purpose and layout

In March, I learned that the Student Programming Office or SPO had created and distributed something similar to RhodyWire. However, after meeting with a SPO intern, I learned that their e-newsletter was sent on a monthly basis to the presidents of student organizations. The newsletter outlined a few big events that were happening each month and gave the organization tips on advertising and promoting events. Their audience, their purpose and their layout were different than RhodyWire's. But ultimately, the SPO newsletter gave me a taste of reality. There will always be competition in the PR industry.

So after overcoming this minor obstacle, marketing and PR for RhodyWire began.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

PR and Marketing

- Initial contact with student organizations – led to Cigar coverage
- Fliers, table tents, handouts
- Booths on campus
- Facebook
- Link on Rhody Nation website

After sending the initial letter out to student organizations, The Good Five Cent Cigar covered the story. We used the traditional methods of advertising – fliers, table tents and handouts – to generate interest and direct people to the website. We had booths in and outside of the Memorial Union where we set up a laptop and encouraged students to sign up for RhodyWire on the spot. And of course we used the internet to get the word out. We used the online community, Facebook, to let students know about RhodyWire. We partnered with Rhody Nation, a new website that sells URI gear; we include a link to their site in every issue of RhodyWire, they have a permanent link on their website to the RhodyWire page.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

Testing RhodyWire

- Sent test issue to subscribers at the end of March
- Included survey
- Few responses but good feedback



As people learned about RhodyWire and signed up to get the debut issue on April 2, I was behind the scenes testing the newsletter. I created a test version of RhodyWire that was sent out the week before the debut. The test issue included all the week's events and also encouraged students to take a quick survey evaluating the effectiveness of the newsletter. Very few people responded but what they did say was that they liked the layout and presentation of information. What they wished to see in the future – off-campus events.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

Goals of project

- To have RhodyWire debut on April 2
- To inform students and create an electronic outlet for promoting events
- For 500+ people to sign up for RhodyWire

Before and throughout the creation of RhodyWire, I set some goals for myself:

- **The first – for RhodyWire to debut on April 2** – I reached this goal on April 2, when the first official issue of RhodyWire did debut. 109 of the 324 recipients opened the newsletter. Which isn't bad for the first issue.
- **To inform students and create an electronic outlet for promoting events** – students have given great feedback, saying that they wouldn't have known about some events if it wasn't for RhodyWire.
- **For 500 or more people to sign up for RhodyWire** – did not reach this goal. Currently 379 people are signed up for RhodyWire. RhodyWire debuted at the end of the semester – attribute the low number to this. Auto-pilot. If it were the beginning of the year and there was more time for word-of-mouth advertising, 500 people would have easily signed up. However, database is gradually increasing every day especially on Mondays after RhodyWire has been distributed.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

The future of RW

- Orientation
- Expand coverage to student-run off campus events?
- Could be the first e-mail students open every Monday morning



So what does the future hold for RhodyWire?

- There is now a RhodyWire chairperson on the executive board who will keep RhodyWire functioning in the future.
- In terms of advertising, the next audience we want to capture is the incoming freshmen. So at orientation this summer, every freshman will get a flier promoting RhodyWire in the goodie bags that are

distributed. Furthermore, students will be encouraged by orientation leaders to sign up for RhodyWire as they are registering their URI e-mail address. Also, Rhody & Co. will be promoting RhodyWire at Freshman First Night in the fall.

- Finally, in years to come, RhodyWire could potentially be the first e-mail URI students open every Monday morning...that is until a new technology forces e-mail off the center stage.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

Three weeks after launch, we asked students what they think about RhodyWire...

Brittany Pond said: "I LOVE RhodyWire, I actually know what's going on and I can plan my day according to the events. The block party was a lot of fun and i would not have even known about it if I hadn't checked this email. Keep up the awesome work"

Patsy Kenney said: "I think the service is great! It is a great reminder of events that are going on on-campus throughout the week. I keep it in my inbox all week and open it everyday to remind myself of daily events that are happening. RhodyWire is something our campus definitely needed. I think student organizations will start to see an increase in attendance at events because of RhodyWire. Great job! GO RHODY!"

Carla Marie said: "I think RhodyWire is awesome, it's getting students aware of every event around campus and will hopefully help organizations. As of now I have no advice on anything to change because it's perfect!"

CONCLUSION

As you can see, RhodyWire has been successful in its early stages. Students no longer have to search for what's happening at URI since RhodyWire

sends the week's schedules right to their inbox. If RhodyWire's success continues, organizations and departments promoting their events on RhodyWire may be able to see attendance at their events gradually increase.

Because of RhodyWire, I have sharpened my e-mail marketing skills, learned how a PR problem can be turned into a PR opportunity, and seen a semester-long project from start to finish. These skills and experiences will be extremely helpful as I enter the working world. The most rewarding part of my RhodyWire experience has been seeing how RhodyWire has made a positive impact on the URI community. RhodyWire has helped create no excuse for the always-present complaint that "there's nothing to do on campus."

I'd like to thank a few people before I open the floor up for questions.

RhodyWire

What's Happening at URI

A big Rhody thank you to...

Dr. Luebke
Rick McIntyre
PRS and Rhody & Co.
Mom & Dad
Matt Becker

...and of course, all the
RhodyWire subscribers



Dr. Luebke – thank you for all of your help and guidance and expertise throughout my project.

Dr. McIntyre – I can't say I turned in my honors proposal on time so I want to thank you for your patience and for your support while I was developing my preliminary ideas.

PRS and Rhody & Co. – thanks for the support and for funding RhodyWire. Couldn't have done it without you.

Mom & Dad – thanks for coming and for your support and for proofing RhodyWire the night before it debuted.

Matt Becker – for listening to me when I was excited about my project and when I was not so excited about it. Oh, and thanks for naming RhodyWire.

Keywords: RhodyWire, e-mail marketing, public relations