

New master's in advertising and brand responsibility is a first

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Advertising has changed a lot since the days of “Mad Men.” From [Gillette’s recent “The Best Men Can Be” campaign](#) to [Nike’s ad featuring Colin Kaepernick](#), companies are forgoing traditional ads and attempting to take a stand on social issues.

To address this emerging trend, this fall the UO [School of Journalism and Communication](#) launched a new [Master of Advertising and Brand Responsibility](#) degree with a 12-student cohort. The first graduate degree of its kind, the program is accepting applications through Feb. 15 for fall 2019.

According to program director [Kim Sheehan](#), the master’s program trains professionals for a new economic reality. More than 70 percent of today’s U.S. consumers want companies to address social justice issues, according to a [2017 study on corporate social responsibility](#). And a survey found that more than 80 percent of people working in advertising believe brands have a responsibility to better society.

“When a brand’s values align with an individual’s values, individuals feel a stronger connection to the brand,” Sheehan said. “While in the past brands tended to downplay their viewpoints on social issues, today many brands choose to make values front and center in their messages. To be successful, they need to be authentic, courageous and committed to social good.”

Sheehan has been working with advertising area head [Deborah Morrison](#) and School of Journalism and Communication alum [Steve O’Leary](#) for three years to plan a curriculum that addresses the changes they are seeing in the industry.

That curriculum focuses on theory, research, creativity and practical skill building. In addition to courses like [Ideasmithing, Essentials for Brand Strategy and Green Brand Strategy](#), all students take a three-term brand responsibility seminar that dives deep into the definition of brand responsibility.

Students examine case studies with the help of guest speakers — industry leaders such as advertising program alum Richard Ward of advertising agency 22squared, best-selling author and social media influencer [Shea Serrano](#), and We Are Next founder Natalie Kim.

“The program gives young professionals the skills to not only succeed in the industry, but fundamentally change it,” said [Travis Kim](#), who was accepted to the advertising and brand responsibility master’s program after graduating from the school’s undergraduate advertising program in the spring. “Going through this program with a cohort that’s just as deeply invested in social and environmental issues as I am is incredibly inspiring and rewarding. The program challenges us to think collectively and creatively about how advertising can impact the world we live in.”

Students in the cohort have recently begun working on their degree capstone, an individualized terminal project designed with the help of a faculty adviser. Projects in the works include strategic brand responsibility campaigns, case studies of successful campaigns, comparative analyses of brands’ engagement around social issues, and internships with a brand responsibility focus.

For his capstone, Brandon Bullas is planning to arrange a partnership between Special Olympics Oregon and a sports brand.

“Special Olympics Oregon has created an everlasting impact on those competing and volunteering, and I want to help make sure this program is able to continue,” Bullas said.

He added that such a connection can ensure stability for the organization, whose financial situation has forced it to cancel some of its signature events in the state.

In and outside of class, students work with brands, such as Juul and Warby Parker, that are looking to connect with their consumers on social issues. They are guided by School of Journalism and Communication faculty members who have been conducting research on the many facets of brand responsibility, including advertising’s interaction with environmental and sustainability issues, representation of different groups of people, and ethics.

Sheehan says that graduates of this unique program will be well-positioned to land jobs at agencies and companies that have already started exploring brand responsibility, as well as many that are likely to join the movement in the future.

“When our students go on to their careers, they will have the expertise to bring issues surrounding brand responsibility to the table and to help brands find the best way to address both social issues and company profit goals,” Sheehan said. “They’re passionate and confident that advertising and persuasive communication can have a positive impact on the world.”

The first cohort of students, who will graduate this spring, are excited to get to work.

“I hope to use both my passions for PR and for advertising to help agencies facilitate relationships that create positive change and mutually beneficial partnerships,” said McKenna Boen, who came to the UO from Biola University. “I hope to add to the movement and encourage authentic action and education.”

—By Randy Newnham, School of Journalism and Communication

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