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SHU Hosts Panel on Digital Marketing

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From left are Joshua Nafman, Andrew Markowitz, Russell Weiner, Brian Cohen and Clay Cowan.

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Sacred Heart University hosted its first annual Digital Marketing Evening recently, featuring a discussion among panelists and global digital marketing executives Brian Cohen, Clay Cowan, Andrew Markowitz and Joshua Nafman. The primary focus of the evening was where the digital marketing field is headed. The event was moderated by Russell Weiner, chair of the Department of Marketing at the Stern School of Business at New York University (NYU).

The event, which was organized by Anca Micu, chair of SHU's Department of Marketing and Sport Management, spotlighted the Department's master's degree in digital marketing. "This is the first MS in digital marketing approved by the Connecticut Department of Education," Micu noted. Classes will be held at SHU's expanded graduate center at Landmark Square in Stamford.

"It's nice to see a new program starting up and serving this area," Weiner added.

While all of the panelists offered unique experiences and perspectives, they agreed on one central idea. Weiner, who was previously at the University of California - Berkeley before moving to NYU, opened with the notion that "the hottest space in marketing is digital." He compared the changes in our culture's digital tapestry to previous evolutions in local marketing. "I think it's going to become pretty much just marketing and not digital marketing in the same way that global marketing is now just marketing," he said. After his introductory remarks, he asked the panelists to comment on their particular areas of work as well as their thoughts on the future of digital marketing.

Nafman is the senior digital brand manager at PepsiCo and plays a vital role in the company's branding process. "Anything that has a Pepsi, Diet Pepsi or Pepsi Max logo pretty much goes through me at some point," he said. "I want to make sure that one day you'll be able to purchase a Pepsi using a text message." Nafman will begin teaching for SHU's digital marketing program in the fall.

Andrew Markowitz, General Electric's (GE) global digital marketing director, discussed the challenges of marketing for a large corporation. While admitting that putting a face on a company like GE that produces rather impersonal products like aircraft engines, solar energy and health care products can be difficult, he pointed out that digital content is an ideal tool to combat that issue. "We try to make it more personal by adding content, blogs and social media. We have people tell stories in more accessible ways," he said. Web content has included factory flyover videos as well as games like Patient Shuffle, created by GE for those in health care. "When we see doctors and nurses in the hospital playing Patient Shuffle on their phones, we know we were successful," he said. He added that GE is not the behemoth marketer that many might think. "We get the most out of our dollar, and we believe in digital. I don't think there is delineation between digital and non-digital anymore," he said, reinforcing the point made earlier by Weiner.

"What stood out to me is the idea that marketing is marketing. Whether it's digital or not, you need to have the same understanding of who you're marketing to," said 2008 Southern Connecticut State University alumna Lauren Hoffman of Naugatuck.

Cohen, who is executive vice president and general manager at E-Tailing Solutions, echoed the others' sentiments about the future of the digital era. "I see digital evolving in the next two to four years," he said. To the students in the room, he said, "We have a lot to learn from you guys. I read an article the other day saying Facebook is for 'old people.' Twitter and Instagram are more powerful around teens and young people."

Clay Cowan, vice president of Global Digital for Starwood Hotels & Resorts, brought up the idea of enabling customers to order room service from their hotel room on their cell phone. "What is unique about travel is that 50 percent of it is now sold online" he said. "The vast majority of our spending is in digital marketing." Cowan also emphasized the importance of a good understanding of how the numbers work. "If I could give you counsel, take math. If statistics class scares you, get to a place where it doesn't," he said.

Nafman agreed, but cautioned that balance is needed when making decisions. "I am a big believer in measurement, but I try to avoid going too far," he said. "I try to take make choices based on 75 percent measurement and 25 percent gut feeling."

One guest was surprised by the focus on numbers from multiple speakers. "It was interesting that they stressed statistics. I am in a traditional marketing field, and it's not a big part of our day-to-day lives right now," said Mala Cornwall of Westport. Cornwall, who works for a marketing agency that targets educators teaching K-12 and at colleges and universities, was excited to attend the event on campus. "Since I am in school for public relations and corporate communications, I really believe digital is the wave of the future," said the SHU MACOMM student. "In my position as a marketing professional and a student, I really wanted to come here and hear from some experts on the topic, and I'm glad I did."

On the topic of hiring new employees, Nafman was very specific that many people can talk about digital marketing, but not as many can do it. "Show that you can do it. Learn how to program. I'm a self-proclaimed computer nerd," he said. "I wanted to make an app, so I went

online, looked at some YouTube videos and learned how to make an app. Talk as a human; don't use buzzwords."

Cowan looks for drive and intellect. "The number one thing I look for is horsepower. Are you a smart person and can you adapt" he said. Cohen focused on confidence and passion: "Passionate intellectual curiosity is number one. A quality we look for is fearlessness. Any time you are doing a campaign, you are taking a risk and it could fail." Markowitz concluded by saying, "Anyone can program; anyone can do Excel—the difference is you. The core of marketing is to deliver the right message at the right time to the right person, and I want good marketers."