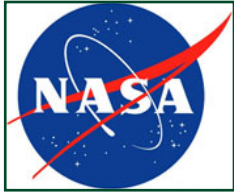




PR STAR



## Dan Kanigan: Public Affairs Specialist for NASA

[By Brooke Heath]

While he was selling athletic shoes to put himself through college, Dan Kanigan never dreamed that just a handful of years later he'd be working as a public affairs specialist for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Raised in Northern Utah, Kanigan received his undergraduate degree in journalism/corporate communications from Utah State University. He decided on the field after he realized how essential positive communication skills are in every workplace and virtually every employment sector.

"I think the biggest motivation to get into PR was seeing the value of good communicators. Every organization has a need to get their information out to the public in a clear, strategic, and efficient way," said Kanigan. "The skills you learn studying public relations can be used in so many different ways in so many different contexts, but they will always be valuable."

After graduation, Kanigan began working for a Salt Lake City-based credit union, overseeing its media relations. He took advantage of this position to fine-tune the skills he had learned while in school.

"The credit union was a great job to get right out of college. I had a lot of raw skills, and working for a smaller organization gave me enough responsibility to really try out some of my ideas. I didn't always get it right on the first try, but I learned a lot, and it really gave me the confidence to succeed in a much bigger arena."

After spending three years working for the credit union, Kanigan moved to Alabama to begin working in his current position with NASA. As a public affairs specialist, Kanigan is definitely utilizing his communication skills, dealing with media relations and employee communications and working what he calls "a beat."

"Currently, my beat is NASA science. That means that I proactively search for

significant stories and accomplishments from the scientists at NASA and pitch them to the appropriate media outlets," Kanigan

### Q. What do you enjoy doing when you aren't working?

A. PR is a taxing profession. It seems like you're always on and you always need to be ready to go "just in case." When I'm not working I just like to do whatever is relaxing. I can watch some football, play with my kids, or even just read something for fun. Now that I'm in the Deep South, I've spent a lot of free time on the barbecue.

### Q. Who do you look up to?

A. I have plenty of great professional examples here at work. Sometimes it feels like I'm playing on an all-star team. But as far as who I really look up to, I'd have to say Barack Obama. I'm really turning into an Obama guy because his message is so fresh and needed. I work in PR, and I study politics, so I can appreciate the difference between pure honesty and a carefully crafted message, but he is saying things that haven't been said in our generation, and if he has the guts to really mean it and follow through, I'll get behind him. There's something about hope that will always resound with people and inspire them.

### Q. What was the last movie that you saw?

A. *Blood Diamond*. Not for everyone but definitely powerful and moving.

### Q. What songs are on your iPod right now?

A. I'm not sure. I have a bit of everything. I know there is some Corinne Bailey Rae and some Norah Jones. Diana Krall, Stevie Wonder, John Lee Hooker, John Mayer, Los Lobos, a bunch of news and football podcasts and an audiobook about Lincoln called *Team of Rivals*.

### Q. What was the last magazine that you read?

A. *Newsweek* and *Men's Health-Best Life*.

explained. "I also communicate these same stories to the agency's employees through print and multimedia outlets. I also field a significant amount of local, national, and international press queries regarding scientific projects, trends, and findings. These queries often turn into interviews, facility tours, press conferences, and documentaries. I am responsible for coordinating and executing each of these as they come up."

Such responsibility is not the norm for someone just four years out of school. Dan attributes his success in the industry to being honest and a quick learner.

"To succeed in public relations, you really need to be a quick study and know how to translate and prioritize information. You hear so much about 'spin doctors,' but the public relations practitioners that find continued and lasting success are completely honest and on the level. That doesn't mean that you always tell everybody everything all at once," said Kanigan. "There is a large portion of strategy in everything you do, but misrepresenting the truth will get you into more trouble and burn more bridges than not."

Kanigan offered this advice for professionals or students considering breaking into the public relations sector:

"If you are at the beginning of your career, you will hear a lot about the value of experience. Until you have been around enough to gather and collect your own experiences, use your time well and study what else has been done. Read case studies, even if they're not directly related to what you are doing. Learning what to do and what not to do from established media campaigns



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and crisis-response plans will let you contribute while you're building your own knowledge archive."

"Honestly," he added, "I think the hardest part about working in the PR industry is just

getting started. If you get into a good first job that offers mentorship and training as well as opportunities to take the reins, you can really take off and make good things for yourself."

Always wanting to further his knowledge, Kanigan is currently pursuing a master's degree in public policy from the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

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