EXPECTATIONS IN ADVERTISING EDUCATION

Future-Ready

Preparing Students for an AI-Powered Industry

February 2026

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Advertising + Public Relations

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THE ANA EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

Contents

Faculty and industry pros are fully aligned on one thing: AI is transforming advertising. However, when it comes to knowledge and skills to prepare the next generation for that reality, their paths diverge.

The 2025 Expectations in Advertising Education survey gathered insights from 92 advertising practitioners and faculty about the core skills and knowledge needed for success in the industry. The findings reveal strong agreement on core skills, including strategy, AI literacy, and communication. However, there are clear differences in how each group believes students should be prepared. The future of advertising education depends on blending strategic thinking with hands-on execution, enabling students to succeed in a rapidly changing, AI-powered industry.

Faculty and Practitioners' Shared Priorities

Adaptability
AI literacy
Collaboration
Communication skills
Curiosity
Data analytics
Integrity
Strategic thinking
Strong work ethic

Where Faculty and Practitioners Differ

Area	Faculty Emphasis	Practitioner Emphasis
Learning focus	Conceptual learning, reflection, creativity	Technical fluency, speed, accuracy
Approach to readiness	Understanding the "why" and exploring ideas	Delivering the "how" and executing quickly
Growth perspective	Long-term development and innovation	Performance, results, and practical output

Overview and Goals

The advertising industry is changing fast, and both educators and employers are feeling the pressure to prepare students for an AI-driven future. As part of the Expectations in Advertising Education initiative, which brings educators and industry professionals together each year to identify the skills and experiences students need to succeed, faculty from Michigan State University's Department of Advertising + Public Relations partnered with the ANA Educational Foundation (AEF) to gather insights from across the field.

Between January and March 2025, 92 people responded to an in-depth survey, split almost evenly between faculty and practitioners (see Appendix for a summary of study participant details). Faculty from a range of universities shared their thoughts on what should be in the classroom, while professionals from agencies, brands, and nonprofits described what they look for when hiring. Together, they offered a clear view of the skills and mindsets that matter most: strategic thinking, creativity, data literacy, AI awareness, and the ability to adapt quickly.

This study updates similar efforts from the 2010s and reflects how dramatically the landscape of advertising education has shifted. AI is now an integral part of everyday work, creative tools are constantly evolving, and data influences nearly every decision. Because the industry continues to change so rapidly, the initiative will repeat this survey annually to track shifting expectations and help keep advertising education aligned with real-world needs.

Faculty teach students how to think. Practitioners need students who can get things done. Both agree that strategic thinking, data analytics, and integrated campaigns matter most, but they differ on whether conceptual strategy or tech-driven execution should come first.

Faculty and practitioners agree on the fundamentals. Both see strategic thinking, data analytics, and integrated campaign planning as essential for students entering the field. The differences show up in what each group believes students should master beyond those basics.

Faculty lean toward areas that build deeper conceptual understanding. They emphasize IMC strategy, internships and practicum experiences, AI literacy, social listening, and social media management. Their priorities reflect the classroom environment, where developing strong thinking skills still takes center stage.

Practitioners focus more on the tools and workflows that power modern advertising teams. They place higher value on programmatic buying, media planning, and marketing technology. They also highlight AI and analytics, but with an emphasis on speed, efficiency, and execution.

Together, these insights reveal a clear opportunity: preparing students with the strategic mindset faculty champion and the technical fluency practitioners expect.

Top Knowledge Areas Emphasized

What Both Groups Want	Strategic thinking Data analytics Integrated campaign planning
Faculty Emphasize	IMC strategy AI literacy Internships and hands-on learning Social listening and social media engagement
Practitioners Emphasize	Programmatic buying Media planning Marketing technology AI and analytics for speed and efficiency
Shared Low Priorities	Econometrics Media sales Basic coding
The Big Insight	Faculty emphasize learning how to think. Practitioners emphasize learning how to do. Students need a blend of strategic insight and tech-driven execution skills.

Skills, Attributes, Experience Needed

Faculty and practitioners see a lot of the same big priorities in the skills students need. Both groups want graduates who communicate well, work effectively with others, pay attention to detail, and bring integrity to their work. These qualities form the baseline of what makes someone employable in advertising today.

The differences show up in the depth and focus of what each group considers most important. Faculty tend to highlight the mindset behind great work: critical thinking, curiosity, and creativity. They want students who ask smart questions, think beyond the obvious, and explore ideas with intention.

Practitioners, meanwhile, lean into the behaviors they need on the job every day. They value professionalism, follow-through, humility, and someone who shows up ready to contribute. For them, factors such as presence, fit, and reliability often matter just as much as technical skill.

Both groups placed very low importance on GPAs, graduate degrees, or published research. Instead, they consistently emphasized practical ability, interpersonal strengths, and a willingness to learn.

Put simply, faculty tend to shape how students think, and practitioners look closely at how students act. Together, they point toward a picture of readiness built on intellectual agility, grounded ethics, and the kind of work ethic that makes new professionals capable and trustworthy.

Faculty nurture how students think. Practitioners look for how students work. Both agree that communication, teamwork, integrity, and strong work habits are the real keys to success.

Top Skills Emphasized

What Both Groups Want	Strong communication Teamwork and collaboration Attention to detail Integrity and solid work ethic
Faculty Emphasize	Critical thinking Curiosity Creativity Building a thoughtful mindset
Practitioners Emphasize	Professional presence Follow-through and reliability Humility and fit Workplace-ready behaviors
Shared Low Priorities	High GPA Graduate degrees Published research
The Big Insight	Students need both the strategic mindset faculty value and the professional readiness practitioners expect.

When participants were asked to name the top courses every advertising student should take, a clear pattern emerged. Everyone wants students to leave school with strategic foundations and real-world readiness. The difference lies in where each group places the greatest emphasis.

Faculty tend to champion the classes that build a student's thinking: understanding consumers, developing strategy, exploring creativity, and tackling IMC from a big-picture perspective. Practitioners, on the other hand, zero in on the courses that mirror the pace and pressure of agency life. They point to media planning, project management, analytics, and the everyday tools that make campaigns move.

Both groups agree that AI and analytics are now must-haves, not electives. The result is a complementary picture: faculty help students understand why things work, while practitioners focus on teaching them how to make things work.

Teaching Priorities

Both Groups Emphasize	AI and analytics
Faculty Emphasize	Consumer behavior and insights Advertising and IMC strategy Creative problem-solving Media and society AI, ethics, and society
Practitioners Emphasize	Media planning and buying Project management Analytics and technology Business writing Campaign planning Budget and resource management
The Big Insight	A strong curriculum combines strategic thinking with operational fluency so students can both understand the work and deliver it.

Industry Trends to Know

When asked about the trends that will shape the future of advertising, faculty and practitioners landed on the same headline: students must be ready for a world defined by AI, data, and constant change. Both groups stressed that success will depend on being adaptable, tech-savvy, and aware of the ethical choices that come with new technology.

Faculty tended to look further ahead. They highlighted the human side of the industry's future, including the ethical use of AI, strong communication, creativity, and social inclusion. Practitioners focused more on what is shifting right now, such as data privacy, automation, new agency models, sustainability, and the rapid evolution of platforms and influencer culture.

Everyone agreed that AI is the biggest force reshaping the field. For faculty, AI raises creative and ethical questions. For practitioners, it is a powerful tool that changes how work gets done. Together, their insights point to a future where students need both technological fluency and the judgment to use these tools responsibly across an ever-changing global media landscape.

Future Must-Know Trends and Topics

Shared Priority	AI and automation are transforming the industry
Faculty Highlight	Creativity and human-centered skills Ethical use of AI Inclusion Media fragmentation Broader societal and economic shifts
Practitioners Emphasize	Data privacy and first-party data New agency models and global collaboration Rapid platform evolution and influencer marketing Sustainability and purpose-driven work
The Big Insight	Students need both the technical skills to keep up with new tools and the ethical judgment to use them wisely in a fast-moving media environment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The 2025 Expectations in Advertising Education survey shows strong agreement on core skills students need: strategic thinking, AI literacy, data analytics, and strong communication. However, faculty and practitioners differ in how they believe students should be prepared. Faculty focus on developing strategic thinkers, while practitioners want graduates ready to step into fast-paced, tech-driven roles. Blending both perspectives creates the strongest path forward.

Faculty develop strategic thinkers.
Practitioners want ready-to-roll doers.
The future of advertising education lies in blending both — big-picture strategy and real-world execution — so students can thrive in an AI-driven, rapidly evolving industry.

Final Recommendations

Faculty	Practitioners	Students
Integrate AI, analytics, and applied tech into coursework	Partner with universities through talks, mentorship, and project briefs	Stay curious, adaptable, and ready to learn strategy and technology
Connect classes with real client work and industry mentorship	Offer feedback that bridges theory and real-world practice	Build a portfolio that shows creativity and data-driven problem solving
Continue emphasizing critical thinking, creativity, ethics, and inclusion	Reinforce creativity, emotional intelligence, and ethics in an automated landscape	Understand how creativity, analytics, and ethics work together in an AI-centered industry

This annual survey helps connect classroom learning with industry expectations. Future editions may add student perspectives to create a full 360-degree view of advertising education and workforce readiness.

About Initiative Collaborators

Edward Timke, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Advertising and Public Relations at Michigan State University. His work focuses significantly on bridging academic and industry perspectives in assessing advertising's place in society, culture, history, and the economy. He is co-editor of the scholarly journal *Advertising & Society Quarterly* and a Fulbright U.S. Scholar to the Stockholm School of Economics (Sweden). He is the director of MSU's study abroad program on advertising and public relations in Scandinavia.

Susan McFarlane-Alvarez, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Advertising and Public Relations at Michigan State University. Her dual-path career spans over thirty years of both academic and industry experience. She is also focused on engaged pedagogical strategies, building pathways of access between academia, advertising, and public relations practice. Her international experience brings global relevance to learning. She is a faculty guide for the student agency, 42pointSEVEN, and co-director of MSU's study abroad to London and Edinburgh, Public Relations in the United Kingdom.

Greg Taucher is the Hopp Faculty Fellow Professor of Practice in the Department of Advertising and Public Relations at Michigan State University. His career spans more than thirty years of global leadership experience in advertising and marketing communications, including senior executive roles across the United States and Asia-Pacific. With a strong focus on connecting academic learning to industry practice, he brings international perspective and real-world insight into the classroom. His professional background supports applied, practice-based learning that prepares students for careers in advertising and public relations within a global marketplace. Greg also is the "founder" of the *Expectations in Advertising Education* survey—in collaboration with the late Dr. Jim Avery, the survey was developed and fielded amongst hiring managers across the 200+ offices across the DDB Worldwide agency network and presented the findings at the American Academy of Advertising conference in Milan in 2010. The survey was subsequently fielded in 2015, 2017, and 2019.

Appendix: Participant Summary

Characteristic	Faculty (n=45)	Practitioners (n=47)	Notes/Highlights
% of Total Sample	49%	51%	Balanced representation
Primary Location	North America (US, Canada)	North America (US, Canada) with some international representation	Diverse regional mix
Primary Institutional/ Organizational Type	Public universities (53%), private universities (18%), liberal arts colleges (4%)	Global agency networks, independent agencies, corporate marketing teams	Reflects educational and industry ecosystems
Median Age	48	43	Faculty slightly older on average
Gender Distribution	Balanced, slightly more female-identifying	Balanced, slightly more male-identifying	Parallels broader field demographics
Average Years of Professional Experience	17	20	Practitioners slightly higher; faculty often with prior industry experience
Median Tenure in Current Role	8 years	10 years	Both indicate mid- to late-career stability
Top Specializations	Strategy, creative, digital/social, analytics	Account management, strategy, creative, operations	Alignment around strategic and creative skills
Typical Organizational/ Program Size	390 undergrads, 35 grads	Mid- to large-sized agencies or corporate teams	Parallel in organizational scale

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