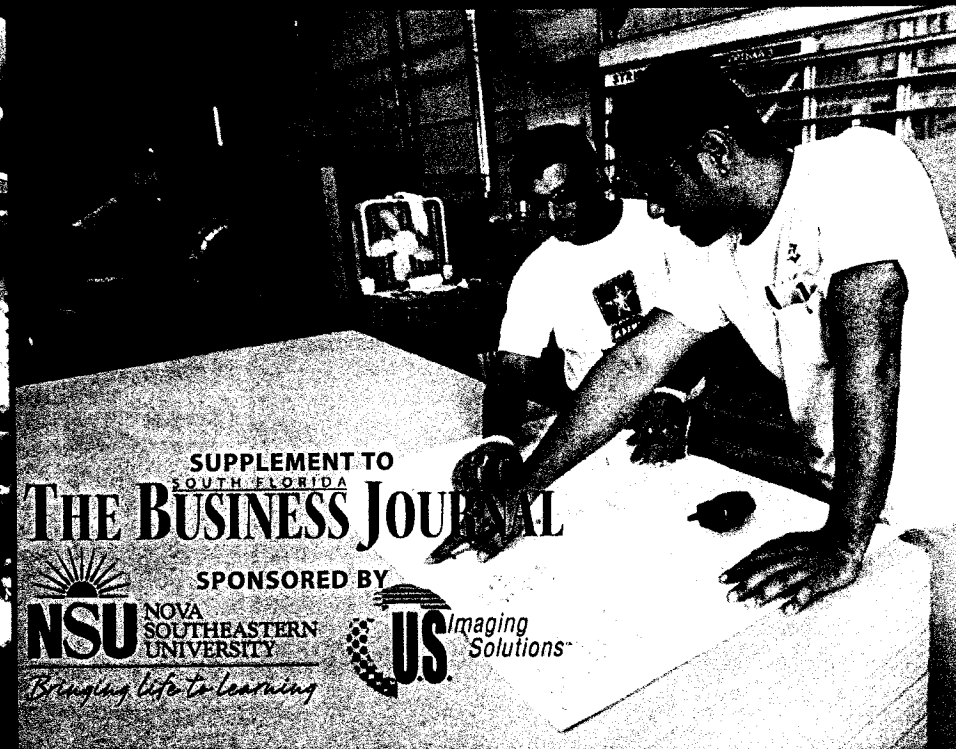
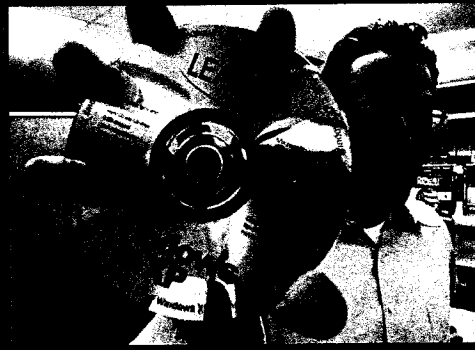


DECEMBER 2004

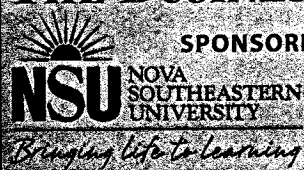


# GUIDE TO EDUCATION



SUPPLEMENT TO  
SOUTH FLORIDA  
**THE BUSINESS JOURNAL**

SPONSORED BY



# Teach in: Thorp & Co. requires lifelong learning

BY ROBIN LONDNER

**T**racy Knudsen had no idea she wasn't speaking as professionally as possible.

"When reviewing the tapes, you discover things that you didn't think you did, such as using 'ums' and 'ahs' when you speak," said the senior account executive at Coral Gables public relations agency Thorp & Co. "I now make a conscious effort to try and improve those things, whereas before, I didn't realize it was an issue."

Knudsen is one of 16 workers at the firm, all of whom must take part in bi-weekly workshops that focus on topics ranging from public relations and marketing best practices to presentation and public speaking exercises.

For case studies, employees work in teams of two or three to identify public relations issues, then formally present those recommendations to the "prospective client," usually play-acted by a current or former client contact.

Thorp & Co. Senior VP David Schull said the agency videotapes the presentations and reviews them as a group.

"The statement I make to people, especially some of the younger people in their careers, is when they enter Thorp & Co., they enter a classroom," Schull said.

The agency is not the only South Florida communications firm to put an intense, time-committed focus on continuing education, though Schull said the comprehensive program is rare for a company of its size. That, he said, means smarter workers, happier clients and staffers staying with the firm.

## Cribbing the work

The Thorp & Co. education program, begun in 1997, differs from traditional knowledge-building exercises because it also invests in a work/life balance component. In addition to the bi-weekly workshops, each fall, Thorp & Co. takes staffers offsite for classroom and field teambuilding sessions.

In October, for example, employees met at a beachfront hotel in



MARK FREERKS

Tracy Knudsen presents to Rashid Saker, Marichelli Heredia and Jeanine Faine in the Thorp office.

Naples. Sessions included developing new job descriptions, personal mission statements and daily stress-reduction techniques.

"Our teambuilding activities included beach games and sing-alongs," Schull said. "In addition, staff members aired their own versions of MTV's 'Cribs' to show us, on videotape, what their lives are like at home."

In its regular activities, Schull said the agency often enlists help from "outsiders" - guest speakers such as reporters and marketing and public relations professionals who share their stories.

For example, he said, Ed Glab, a Florida International University professor and former public relations officer, spoke of his public relations experiences in more than 80 countries.

Thorp account executive Robin Yearwood said Glab provided insight on the cultural nuances PR professionals must take into account when developing strategies for companies launching business ventures abroad.

Yearwood said the agency has handled national and international public affairs-type work over the years, but demurred on whether she had handled such work herself.

"We have clients with such a



David Schull leads a sing-along at the company's October retreat in Naples.

wide range of needs, I'm sure I'll use the information in the near future," she said.

But despite the time staffers spend improving their education at the office and at the retreats, Schull said the agency has no hard numbers calculated on the program's potential return on investment.

"The return on our investment is priceless in light of the frequent kudos we receive from clients about the performances of our staff members," Schull said, mentioning staffers' improved knowledge and polish.

## PR: People retention

Another benefit, Schull said, runs counter to the fear some companies may have over setting up continuing education: staff retention. Schull said when hiring, Thorp & Co. seeks out people

who want to gain knowledge, not those who feel they are already at the peak of their careers.

"Because we look at people who want to grow and forward their careers, they see it as beneficial to be in an environment where we want them to advance," he said. "They can accomplish what they want here and don't have to go elsewhere."

Schull said the agency employs people who started as interns and today manage large portfolios of business.

"They therefore see opportunities with us, here, versus being in one-dimensional jobs where they are handling tasks of the day and don't have the opportunity to advance in the system," he said.

That retention also translates into savings. In an industry that international firm Waggner Edstrom estimated has a nearly 50 percent annual employee turnover, Schull said Thorp & Co.'s top people have been at the 16-year-old PR firm for about six years. The only real movement, he said, is at the agency's lower levels.

"The only turnover we typically see is ... not everyone is able to make it in a system like ours," he said. "I've been here eight and a half years and I've never even missed a day for being sick."

**E-MAIL ADVERTISING/public relations writer Robin Londner at [rlondner@bizjournals.com](mailto:rlondner@bizjournals.com).**