

Catalyst Profile
Jason Ward

Though Jason Ward, the WCU alumnus of 1989, is a Harvard man with over a decade of e-commerce experience at Wachovia Bank, he was first exposed to the culture of Wall Street in Cullowhee.

As an undergraduate, this North Carolina native enrolled in WCU's computer science program. Though the "hard and challenging" work earned Ward an internship with the Central Intelligence Agency, he "thrived" on a liberal arts curriculum.

Thus, in pursuit of a "diverse education," he changed his major to history. There, surrounded by scholarly journals on William Alexander Graham and Cherokee artifacts, he began to learn a little something about the corporate ladder.

Max Williams, professor emeritus of history, expected the best from Ward, something he would later encounter while handling Fortune 500 companies and digital marketing accounts. The instructor-turned-mentor also pushed his students to perceive the past in terms of trends, instead of facts. This abstract approach motivated Ward to chart his own path in higher education.

During his junior and senior years, he took independent study courses, learning to think critically and, most importantly, to be self-driven. His motivation caught the attention of many, including the recruiters on Wall Street.

In 1991, after working on Wall Street as an investment banking analyst for Prudential-Bache Capital Funding, Ward began pursuing his master's in business administration at Harvard University. As the youngest student in his class, he had to "look for unique opportunities to brand himself."

"Coming from WCU, people had low expectations but they saw my aggressiveness," said Ward, explaining the key differences between a regionally known and nationally known institution. "I didn't have an Ivy League education, but my background was distinctive, and I got noticed."

Though employers in the investment-banking sector did, in fact, notice Ward after he graduated from "Crimson," he had other plans in mind. In the late 1990s, he saw a connection between the Internet and banking. After dabbling in consulting at Price Waterhouse, AT&T, and Potomac Partners, this former Catamount started his career in eBusiness at Wachovia.

For over a decade, he managed the bank's online presence, refining user experience design, copywriting, design, usability, and online advertising. In 2010, Adobe Systems picked up Ward, hiring him to accelerate their online marketing capabilities.

Now, as a global account executive at Adobe's Charlotte location, he continues to assist companies in developing their "digital maturity." Though he no longer works on Wall Street, Ward still understands the culture of it all—the need to be self-driven, motivated, and "aggressive."

"You can't get niched in just one thing," said Ward. "You have to be diverse, work extremely hard, and create your own path. The history professors at WCU taught me that."