

## Working with Your PR Firm

Article provided by HMA Public Relations

Many reasons exist for outsourcing any activity within your business. For public relations, it could be that you don't have a designated person to handle the function. Maybe you are the function and you are overwhelmed with activity. Or maybe you keep a public relations agency or individual on board in the event of a crisis. In any case, the relationship between an organization and a public relations agency or consultant can be a tenuous one when not managed appropriately.

Understanding how public relations agencies work can go a long way toward helping you appreciate the void they can fill and why they function the way they do. What you find frustrating is just everyday activity within an agency.

Public relations professionals are similar to attorneys, accountants and architects who sell their talent and knowledge. We are business advisors providing counsel regarding public relations issues.

One of the biggest complaints from an organization to their public relations agency is the apparent lack of knowledge about that organization's business. That's not our job. We know public relations; you know your business. Together, we complement each other.

The tricky thing about understanding public relations as a practice is that it isn't very scientific. A public relations agency's invoices are not likely to contain a checklist of completed items. Public relations is about building and maintaining relationships with key audiences and publications.

Below are general guidelines to help you work affectively with your public relations agency, maximizing their talent and knowledge.

1. **Communicate early and often:** Whatever guidelines you put in place for your consulting team, make regular meetings a priority. This will create a healthy dialogue with each member of the team, ensuring everyone involved – those on your end and those on the agency side – each share the same vision.

An added benefit of regular meetings is the agency is top of mind when you need to communicate something new. It becomes a habit to include them in the company goings-on.

2. **Include them in the fold:** Sharing your company's high-level strategy or vision with the public relations agency is important.

It is practically impossible for your public relations agency to be strategic about communicating a coherent corporate story if they haven't been exposed to senior-level executives, corporate marketing plans, relevant research findings and the

like. They look for opportunities, and knowing what your ultimate goals can only help.

Confidentiality is key here. Your public relations agency can be trusted to keep this information close to the vest. As a professional standard, a client's trust is pertinent to do an affective job communicating. You have to trust them and trust they know what they're doing. These concerns should all be handled in the selection process. If you don't trust your consultant, then it's time to go back to the drawing board.

3. **Lay it on the line to avoid excuses later:** What are your goals? Are you trying to improve the perception of your company in a local community, or on a national level? Are you creating an internal communications component? Are you in need of some extra help for your own job, someone to implement what you've strategically planned?

Whatever your expectations, it's only fair to share them with your public relations agency. If you're not sure exactly what you need to achieve, work with the agency in the early stages of your relationship to establish reasonable goals and expectations. There are certain things your public relations firm can't promise; front-page stories are never a guarantee.

Businesses tend to hire a public relations agency or consultant for a few key reasons: to help them gain exposure; control a crisis; manage their reputation; or build an image. To achieve these end results, clients must be committed to ongoing, regular communication, willing to provide access to critical information and set reasonable expectations with their public relations partners. If you're not comfortable with these three general activities, you probably aren't ready for a public relations agency.

*HMA Public Relations is a full-service marketing communications agency whose experience encompasses work in the traditional marketing communications disciplines including public relations, media relations, marketing communications, issues management, community relations and special events.*

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