

## **When it comes to hiring a PR firm, those who fail to plan ... should plan to fail.**

By Karen Schwartzman

Few businesses or law firms change banks every two or three years. Or accounting firms. But companies seem to burn through PR firms like kindling on a bonfire. Why do so many companies feel cheated by their PR firm? Why do so many PR firms feel unappreciated by their clients?

Most relationships fail due to unrealistic expectations and misunderstandings. As someone frequently called in to help companies decide whether to use a PR firm and if so, how to choose the right firm, I note the following six common failings:

1. Many clients don't know what they're trying to accomplish through public relations. "More visibility," they say, but more visible to whom? Customers? Employees? Shareholders? Regulators? Peers? As important, more visibility for what purpose? To drive sales? Announce a stock split? Launch a new product? If you're not sure what you're trying to accomplish – or whom you're trying to reach, don't be surprised if your p.r. firm speaks the equivalent of Swahili to Mexicans -- and communicates nothing.
2. Many clients don't know the difference between publicity that can be generated from legitimate news and visibility that comes only at a cost, through paid advertising. They think that everything the company does is news and belongs on page one. Those that think this way are rarely satisfied, and blame their p.r. firm if they're not in the day's headlines.
3. Some clients (and p.r. firms too, for that matter) think public relations is limited to press placements. Those that do ignore the full range of tools firms can use to increase visibility. Publicizing success stories, getting company experts quoted, and placing by-lined columns in trade publications will increase visibility and stature among your peers; and they may help with employee morale and recruitment. But if you've hired a public relations firm to help you grow your business, this tack is probably a waste of time. Your customers and prospects don't read publications that target your trade.

When evaluating p.r. firms for my clients, I urge competitors to identify the full range of tools in their tool kit and see how long the conversation lasts. Those who demonstrate multiple ways to reach people are contenders. Those who take the time to understand the task, and then pair the right tool with the task, will probably be your best bet.

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4. Many clients believe that once they farm out the p.r. function, they can sit back and wait for the phone to ring. Wrong. Effective public relations requires partnership. When a company doesn't understand and accept its role, the partnership is doomed. A good public relations firm can open key doors, but it's up to the client to walk through them. Similarly, a good p.r. firm can draft news releases and success stories, but only if the team is kept well informed. Wherever p.r. consultants have to fight for attention, information and respect, the results are almost always disappointing.

5. Many companies hire a p.r. firm without sufficient regard to the chemistry between the parties – and yet chemistry between public relations consultant and client is probably more important than any other qualifier. At a minimum, companies evaluating public relations firms are wise to:

- Evaluate *every* member of the account team for experience and professional reputation.
- Watch out for bait and switch. Make sure you know *who specifically* will be assigned to your account. *Who* works on your account is just as important as the firm they work for.
- As you check references, be sure to talk not only to past and current clients, but also to reporters who cover news related to your business. You need to know that those assigned to your account are viewed by the press to be credible, ethical, and responsive.
- Check for conflicts. Your public relations firm should not be doing proactive public relations work for any other firm in the same business – lest they do so at your expense.

6. Some companies make the mistake of placing far too much emphasis on crisis management capabilities. Proactive public relations and crisis management work are entirely different disciplines. A firm that is strong in one department is not necessarily strong in the other. Since crises are usually few and far between, I urge clients to hire a public relations firm without regard to their crisis management expertise – and engage independent crisis management support if and when they need it.

Companies that take the time to understand what they want to accomplish through public relations, assess their own readiness to do their part, and think through the hiring process so that they select the right firm for both the job and their environment, will be rewarded with a p.r. firm that produces, and lasts. Those that don't will be looking at an "agency review" two years hence, embarked on yet another campaign to find 'right' firm.

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