

“Right Size” is the Right Way to Select a Public Relations Firm

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Most companies recognize the benefit of professional public relations counseling. They often need outside assistance in communicating with customers, prospects, shareholders, employees, the community-at-large, regulatory agencies, government officials, and print, broadcast, and online media (who are both a target audience and a conduit to others). They may seek public relations counsel when they have an important product to launch, want to position their management and technology teams as industry leaders, or need crisis communications planning and media training.

However, many don't know where to begin the search for an agency. With public relations firms ranging from individual practitioners to global agencies, where does a company manager begin the search?

Gone are the days when a company simply called the biggest firm in the area, preferably one with an office in New York City. The rationale was “the bigger, the better.”

That approach would be a mistake today. Unless you are a Fortune 100 global company and require the services of a mega-agency for a global communications program, you may well not need a big agency. Certainly, not if your budget is limited and you want ongoing attention from senior-level counselors.

Preparing for the Search

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) recommends beginning with clear goals. Ask:

- What are your business and marketing objectives? (I always ask clients to finish this sentence: “This effort will be a success if . . .”)
- Do you want strategic counseling, a crisis communications plan, support for specific projects, product publicity, a research project, or Web site design? Or, do you want help in positioning your company against the competition with an integrated communications program?
- What is your budget? Disclosing the size of your budget to the agency should net you proposals that will help meet your objectives within budget. (This up-front honesty also gets the relationship off to a good start.)

What To Look For In An Agency

- **Right Size.** If you're a small to mid-size firm, or even a division of a multinational corporation, you're probably going to be happiest with a small, independent agency, where the firm principals or senior-level experienced practitioners both manage and work on your account. You may want to consider a sole practitioner as well, especially if you have a discreet project that requires particular expertise. Many independent practitioners and small agency principals have come out of large agencies to work more closely with clients.

- **Location — Not.** In today's wired world, it isn't necessary for an agency to be located in a downtown, high-rent district. Those that aren't typically pass their cost savings along to clients. Nor is it necessary for all of the firm's staff to be located in the same office. (My business partner and I work out of separate offices, and we sometimes partner with colleagues throughout the Northeast.)

- **Experience.** Look for an agency and account staff with experience in your category and in the practice areas required for your marketing objectives. If you're a manufacturing company or a financial services institution, you want someone who has worked with other manufacturing or financial services companies. If you plan to launch a consumer product, look for an agency that has launched other consumer products. Carefully assess the experience of the people who will work on your team. You want to avoid having to instruct an agency's inexperienced staff, on your ticket.

- **Business Practices.** Be sure to ask the agency about their reporting and billing procedures and look for one that provides status reports with invoices.

- **Client Contact.** Ask the agency whether the people you first meet are the people who will work on your business. The right agency will be as eager for this early match-up as you are.

- **Personal Style or Chemistry.** Don't underestimate the value of personal style. You will want a partner who has good chemistry with you and your staff and is comfortable with your corporate culture, while maintaining the healthy independence that leads to fresh thinking on your behalf. This is the person or team you will consult in the event of a crisis and who will be representing your company with editors and other key constituencies.

Being a Good Partner

Once you've selected the firm or counselor that has the best understanding of your industry and needs and has the qualifications to produce the results you seek, here are a few basic hints for getting the new relationship off to a good start:

- Share information with your agency; that's the only way it can do its best work for you.
- Call reporters when promised, they remember people who remember their deadlines.
- Pay the agency's invoices promptly. Like you, they have a business to run and vendors and staff to pay.
- Provide necessary approvals to keep projects moving along.

Finding the right match in a public relations partner will pay off in time, money and results.

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