

## How to Make the Most of Your Public Relations Firm

**Even if you hire** the best public relations firm in the world, the investment is useless if you don't know how to work with the agency. There are plenty of ways to torpedo your own investment: By withholding information from your PR agents, not having information on hand, and being unprepared to speak to the reporters when media opportunities come along.

According to several public relations experts, if your relationship with your publicity team is dishonest or distrustful, you might as well not hire a team at all.

To make sure you aren't sabotaging your own efforts to get your company's name out and your brand recognized, experts offer these tips to getting the most out of your firm.

### **Making the Most of Your PR Firm: Focus on Communications**

As with any relationship, the key to having a strong rapport with an agency is maintaining a good channel of communication.

"For your PR team to really be your strategic partner, there needs to be a constant and consistent flow of information back and forth," says Brenda Lynch, senior vice president at the Rogers Group, which is based in Los Angeles and whose clients include Cinnabon. "The company and agency should be in a constant dialogue about the good, the bad and ... what is going to be your next move to gain or retain industry leadership."

### **Making the Most of Your PR Firm: Set Solid Expectations**

Grace Leong, managing partner of **Hunter Public Relations**, which is based in New York and whose clients include Kellogg Company and Hasbro, says her first step with clients is usually to set goals for what they expect out of the firm. Do they want just publicity to become a guest on *Oprah* or simply to be mentioned in a magazine? Or do they want full-service public relations, which includes helping craft a full media message and communications strategy? "That's where I see a lot of the relationships getting wonky in the beginning," she says.

Once goals are set, regular meetings are crucial to maintain a successful partnership. Tracy recommends biweekly meetings, in person if possible, along with regular status reports to keep everyone updated between meetings.

The reports should include an overview of outreach efforts, where stories are being pitched, and what the feedback, she says.

The kind of constant contact required is why having an amiable personal relationship is key, Leong says. "You're going to spend a lot of time with your public relations firm," she says. "You want to actually like the people and have a good working environment."

That means letting the team into the inner circle of your company.

"Clients have to be willing to share personal and background stories so that public relations person is armed with the most information possible," says Mark Day, senior vice president at DVL, a firm based in Nashville. DVL is currently promoting Jack Daniel's 160th birthday celebration.

Why share everything? You might not have realized it, but maybe there's something unique about your business, yourself, or your founding, that could really help sell your story to the press. And if you can't recognize that special story, perhaps your PR agency can.

Erin Tracy, vice president of Regan Communications, whose clients include the Boston Celtics and Dunkin Donuts, found this out first hand when her company, which is based in Boston, was promoting Flowerpowercreative.com, a baby boomer culture website.

A small anecdote turned into the lead of a Wall Street Journal story this August: it talked about how the founder went from daydreaming while chauffeuring big shots — including Vice President Joe Biden and former Hearst Corp. president Victor Ganzi — around New York to pursuing his own enterprise.

"There's always a background story that tends to make for a really great story," Tracy says. "We obviously recommend that the client doesn't hold anything back. Sometimes the smallest detail of your story is the most attractive to the journalist."

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### **Making the Most of Your PR Firm: Use All Available Services**

The services most public relations firms offer don't stop at writing press releases and booking television appearances. Most firms offer a wide array, and much of that often goes unused or underappreciated.

Tracy says to take advantage of media training offered by your firm, which can help prepare employees not just for interviews but also can improve skills for presentations and speaking opportunities.

"Even the most media savvy CEOs have room for improvement," she says. "Even if it's just hand gestures and being reminded not to use 'ums' and 'likes.' "

Leong says a lot of firms now also offer social media training to help determine how Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter can be used to promote your business.

Cynthia Howard, director of strategy and planning for DVL, says clients are often unaware of the full breadth of services the firm provides. Her firm, for instance, can help clients build websites and create other online tools.

"Now we're a much more diverse firm," she says. "We don't build websites just to build websites. There's a campaign, there's an objective and an audience that we're trying to reach."

You can also call in your publicity team for a brainstorming session when trying to come up new strategies or approaches, since public relations people tend to be in touch with social and media trends.

"Their expertise at the brainstorming table will be invaluable," she says.

A firm can set up metrics to measure the success of campaigns, such as how many hits a website is receiving or how many calls are coming into an 800 number, Leong says.

### **Making the Most of Your PR Firm: Dealing With Crisis Situations**

Your public relations team will help walk you through a crisis — such as a bad news report about your company — but trust and openness are key.

"They have to give full access to all the data," Leong says. "That's what puts most companies in crisis is when they're not open about it."

It might sting at first, but in the long run, every case study in crisis communication shows that the truth will come out eventually, she says.

Entrepreneurs, especially new, energetic ones, have a habit of trying to micromanage in these situations.

"If you've hired me and you trust me at the get go, you kind of need to stand back and let me do my job," she says. "One of biggest mistakes with young entrepreneurs, people get so passionate business and get too involved with craft that's not their expertise. You need to trust the experts"

Lynch says setting sensible goals helps keep everyone on track, "but completely unrealistic, unattainable goals demoralize everyone and are counterproductive." To be prepared for a crisis situation, Leong recommends reading up on case studies — such as the recent BP disaster — to see what works and what doesn't.

"An entrepreneur can learn a lot from other people's mistakes," she says.

Another common mistake businesses make is not having materials such as photos or background data ready. Tracy says you should work with your firm to make sure you can act quickly when news organizations request information.

"If the client is lackadaisical or if there's a delay in getting that information, there may be a missed opportunity because media is working on a deadline," she says.