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Picking a Public Relations Firm

Choosing the right PR pro is the key when it's your company's turn in the spotlight.

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As we enter into the new year with an economy that is finally showing signs of life, businesses are under renewed pressure in the fight to attract customers. Many small businesses will look at advertising and promotion as the key marketing tools with which to build institutional and product awareness. The problem is that these options are pricey - an effective advertising campaign can be out of reach for many small companies. How, then, do you break through the clutter and get the most bang for your buck when bucks are limited?

Public relations is often employed as a valuable and cost effective alternative. PR that is truly compelling, targeted and strategic can define your brand and motivate your target audience. In New York City, PR can be particularly effective because there are more media outlets here than anywhere else -both locally and nationally.

The downside, of course, is that this it is also one of the most competitive places on earth. At any one moment, any number of people may be fighting for that same small column inch of media turf. But that's where a skilled and savvy PR person can make the difference. The right PR person will enable you to position your story and find the best media outlets and the most receptive reporters.

Going Public

As a small business owner, how do you know when the time is right to consider an outside PR consultant? You can start by honestly evaluating whether what you want to say to the world is truly of interest to anyone beyond your immediate family. A

credible PR pro will give you an honest opinion about the news value of your story before going forward.

Finding the right PR consultant is not an easy process. There's very little credentialing involved; virtually anyone can hang out a shingle and call themselves a PR expert. You can look in the phone book, you can call the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) or you can ask your father-in-law. For my money, it's all about referrals. You want the anecdotal perspective - the war stories. What was your prospective consultant like to work with; how responsive were they; did they truly understand what they were pitching; and did they deliver qualitative as well as quantitative results? You may also ask to see clippings and writing samples.

As much as we may try to quantify its results, PR will always be an inexact science. Unlike advertising, placements cannot be guaranteed and the value of an individual press hit is difficult to put a price on. In spite of the obvious uncertainties, however, searching for and retaining an outside PR firm or consultant doesn't have to feel completely murky. There are ways to make it a little easier to evaluate the process. When working with PR consultants, here are a few things to consider:

Don't Be Paralyzed by Sticker Shock

When I prepare a proposal, I like to give potential clients a comprehensive soup to nuts package, detailing everything we can offer, with the understanding that we can amend the menu of services to fit specific budgets and priorities. Unfortunately, some prospective clients become overwhelmed by the details and the overall fee structure. You need to be clear and firm about exactly what you want to accomplish.

To the Point

- Get referrals from colleagues or do research to find the PR firm right for your business.
- Ask to see your potential PR pro's plan or "road map."
- Don't settle for lip service. Ask the right questions to ensure that you both have the same vision (see the **Asking the Right Questions** section).

Ask for the Plan

Most independent PR firms and consultants are wary of giving away too much in a proposal. They'll provide a general outline but they may hold back on specific creative ideas or other details. However, the proposal should give you a solid picture of their strategic thinking and planning. Once the agency is on board, you should expect a detailed plan to illustrate exactly how they'll take you from concept to execution. It's what I call a 'road map' and you, as the client, have the right to it. While the above points are vital for you to consider when picking a potential PR rep, there are also a number of items you need to take into

account when shopping for outside PR:

- Do they understand your business? Can they take your story and speak the language of your business to a journalist?
- Do they know how to think like a journalist? Can they find and articulate the news value in what they are pitching?
- Do they understand strategic positioning? Do they recognize the difference between 'getting ink' and generating PR that truly makes an impact? · What is their plan?
- Can you communicate with each other? The PR process can feel strange and uncertain; it's up to your consultant to explain what's going on along the way.
- Are you comfortable with this person as the public face of your company
- Are they creative and passionate about your business? Does their approach feel cookie cutter or is there a sense that your company's needs are unique and different?
- Do they come recommended? What do their clients say? What do journalists say about them?

Asking the Right Questions

When it comes time for you to meet with your prospective PR firm or representative, you have to be on the lookout for lip service. After all, this is a person who makes pitches all the time. Here are a few things to ask for to try and pin down your prospective consultant and get the right answers you are looking for:

- What media do they think you should be in? What media do they think they can get you in?
- What results should you expect and when?
- Who do they know at the media outlets you want to be in? If she doesn't already have those contacts, don't panic; a good PR person will know how to get up to speed quickly. However, if he does have pre-existing relationships it can only help you and leverage them to your advantage.
- After explaining your business, ask the consultant to "pitch you". Evaluate how well she understands your business.
- Who from the PR firm will be your contact and pitching your angles?
- Does the consultant recommend a shotgun or rifle approach?
- Ask for case histories. How did your consultant deal with similar situations with other clients in the past? Was he pro-active and strategic? Was he able to control the messaging? Ask to see both press releases and media

clips: it's helpful to see how the stories turned out.

- Ask for writing samples. A good PR person should be able to illustrate his or her ability to distill, package and present information via an effective pitch letter, press release, or talking points document.
- What PR activities should be done in addition to pitching press releases. Sometimes you just want someone to get on the phone and get the story. But it's nice to know if your person has the potential to come up with some fresh ideas. You never know when you may need them.

Most PR companies want a multi-month contract so you will be locked in for a while. Take the steps now to ensure that your relationship will get you more than your 15 minutes of fame.

Related Links

[Choosing a PR Agency \(allbusiness.com\)](#)

[Star Makers \(entrepreneur.com\)](#)

[Before Picking a PR Firm, Shop Around \(Orlando Business Journal\)](#)

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