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Call to the Executive Suite: No Time for Mentoring? Think Again

Senior PR exec urges his C-suite brethren out from behind their desks to personally mentor junior-level staff—and enjoy greater returns as a result.

Op-Ed by Alan Winnikoff, Co-Principal, Sayles & Winnikoff

There has been considerable discussion on these pages recently about the value—or lack thereof—of junior publicists pitching journalists. Much has been made of how dangerous—not to mention, ineffective—it is for firms to put junior people out on the front lines, only to be chewed up by cranky editors trying to make deadlines. This is certainly an important issue, yet it is not as black and white as some would have it.

Since launching our firm two-and-a-half years ago, my partner and I have successfully sold our clients on the fact that when they hire our agency, they get us: two senior executives with over 20 years of experience each. However, the truth is we want to grow and growth requires additional staff. No, we don't ever intend to become a 50- or 60-employee shop. But even a boutique agency has to embrace opportunities for expansion.

So how can an agency feel reasonably confident that when their employees make calls to journalists, they are both achieving results for their clients and maintaining the reputation of the firm?

The simple answer is training and mentoring. It is both foolish and irresponsible to give a junior associate a media list, a set of talking points and a cubicle—and to just let him loose. And yet, this happens far too often. It is understandable that senior PR pros are often overworked as they are forced to put out their own fires throughout the course of their day. But they need to understand that time spent mentoring a junior associate is not an option—it is as important as anything they will do that day.

My advice: Take an hour or more with the junior person before he gets on the phone. Go over the pitch and the client. Make sure he understands the big picture so he will be able to put the story in context. Equally important, review the press list and give him a heads-up on some of the personalities he will be speaking with. Have him start with some of the friendlier writers so he can get his feet wet. Spend time in his cubicle listening to him on the phone and provide feedback, just as you would for a client who completes an interview.

This is simply good business practice. Yet it is amazing how often it is neglected. Furthermore, mentoring is not only good for your business, but it is also *incumbent* upon senior PR people for another reason: It is simply the *right thing to do*. None of us would be where we are if someone hadn't taken the time to guide us at some point in our careers. We need to return some of that good karma by helping the next generation become worthy professionals.

Teaching young people the right way to practice PR would be an essential part of our jobs even if there were no immediate, tangible rewards for doing so. In fact, one of the most satisfying aspects of my career is the sheer number of people who worked for me at one time and who are now enjoying great success. As we go through our crazy days, we sometimes wonder what it all means and why we are doing it. This is the best reason I know of. Let's not forget it.

Alan Winnikoff is co-principal of *Sayles & Winnikoff*, sharing in the strategic direction and management of the company. He was previously one of the founding executives of Sony Wonder, the family entertainment division of Sony Music. He has also held executive PR and marketing positions at the cable news channel MSNBC and at IDG Books.

Dec 28

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