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## BARKS & BITES

### PR's New Client Dilemma: Win Announcements Can Fuel Paranoia, Client Jitters, Competitive Sniping June 12, 2007



By Alan Winnikoff, Co-Principal, Sayles & Winnikoff

Perhaps you remember the seminal essay from the 1960's entitled "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," by the historian Richard J. Hofstadter. For those of us of a certain age, it was required college reading. That title came to mind recently when my boutique PR firm found itself in the happy position of having signed several new high profile clients. Now, you may ask, how does signing new business relate to paranoia? New clients are a cause for celebration—closing a deal is one of those too infrequent moments when you can actually take a breath and pat yourself on the back.

It does, however, bring up a dilemma many PR agency folks may recognize. Should we announce these new clients to the world—or, more specifically in this case, to the insular PR trade world as we know it? And, if so, how exactly do we do it?

It won't come as a shock to anyone reading this that the PR agency business is an extremely competitive environment. So it's natural to ask: Do we want to tell our competitors who we represent? Moreover, our existing clients can be, uh, shall we say, insecure? We are working as hard as we can for them on a 24/7 basis. But they need constant reassurance that their PR investment is providing returns commensurate to their expectations. Do we really want to give them reason to worry that our agency's resources and efforts are now going to be diverted to these shiny new clients? By issuing a press release touting our new signings, are we running the dual risks of both activating the antennae of our competitors and feeding into the simmering nervousness of our clients?

When it comes to our clients, we are remarkably clear-eyed and lucid. We are able to articulate and execute thoughtful, aggressive strategies that help them meet their business objectives and elevate their brand visibility. However, PR people are also known to suffer from the "shoemaker's children" syndrome. When it comes to our own businesses, we sometimes find it difficult to do for ourselves what we do so well for others. We know we need to get out there and build our agency's profile. We want potential new clients to know about all the good things we are doing and all the impressive people we are working with.

This is where the paranoia kicks in. We start measuring the value of heightened visibility against the potential downsides noted above. Suddenly, a simple "win announcement" doesn't seem so simple anymore.

It's not like our client list is a secret. You can go onto our website and read all about the companies, products and people we work with. But somehow, putting out a press release raises the ante. Maybe it is all only paranoia. Or is that paranoia justified—perhaps just a little?

*Sayles & Winnikoff co-principal Alan Winnikoff shares in the strategic direction and overall 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, the publishers of the "For Dummies" series and Frommer's Travel Guides, among other brands.*

#### Reader response:

*The title of this article drew me in immediately because it speaks precisely to a question that's on my mind today as we sign a large regional client. And, while I enjoyed the author's pondering, I felt the story was a bit flat. My question went largely unanswered; should I announce or shouldn't I? What's the advice?—rpetticrew*

*This is a very interesting view and I thank Alan for offering it. When I was with an international agency, we could hardly wait to get a release out. But his perspective is well worth considering. I think smaller to mid sized growing agencies want to get the word out to create buzz and show that they're "hot." Still, I know a very successful independent established agency here that shares his view and has never issued a new client release. It doesn't seem to have limited their growth or prestige.—Dennis*

*I appreciate the comments. In response to the first comment, I wrote the story because I truly don't know the answer. I, too, am looking for perspective. However, unlike the final "Sopranos" episode, I will try to provide some closure: After the story was published, I heard from several professionals I know and respect. I also discussed it with my partner. Long story short—we are issuing a win release. The consensus among most is that the pros outweigh the cons. (But some trepidation remains!)—Alan Winnikoff*