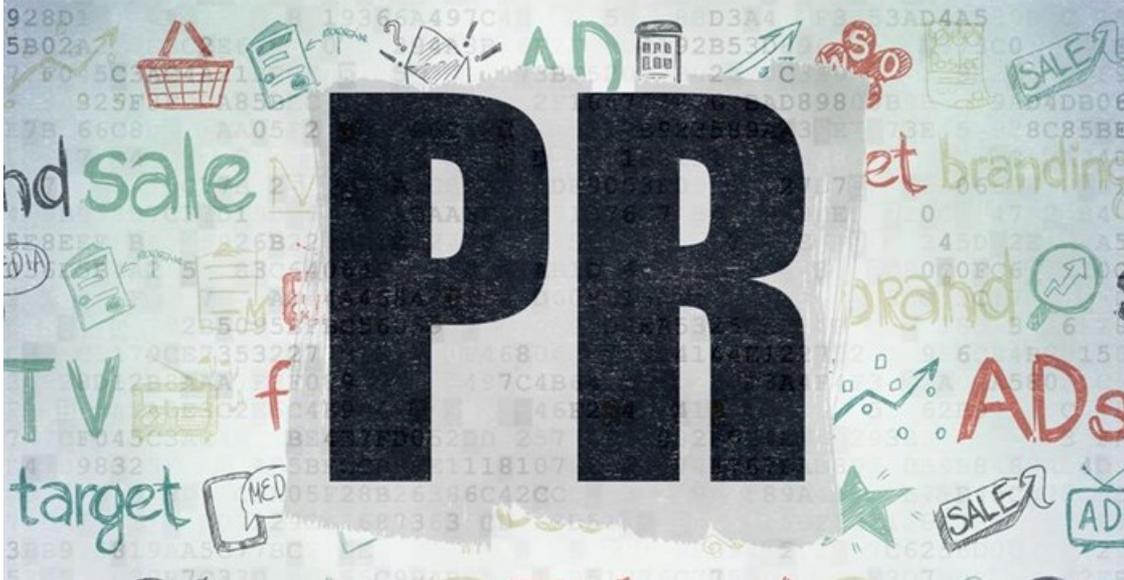


In-house public relations expertise is essential

By  Jennilee Peremore

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In the public relations (PR) industry, there is a constant debate about the value of hiring a PR employee or outsourcing a PR consultancy. It is clear why most PR employees would vouch for the former and PR consultants for the latter; job security is paramount.



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As a public relations professional (PRP), I have experienced all the scenarios; being the in-house PR representative, having worked with outsourced PR consultancies, and now operating independently as a PR consultant.

It would be in my best interest to vouch for PR consultancies, and why they should be a company's sole PR representation. However, that would not be an objective statement to make and would be an injustice to the PR industry where the sole role of a PRP is to act with integrity and honesty towards clients who depend on their professional direction to help them maintain the reputation of their organisations.

Digital media continues to grow extensively where the publication of news and opinions are no longer just limited to media professionals, but extends to the public. Anyone can publish whatever they want on almost any online platform without taking the journalistic guidelines into consideration.

Importance of reputation management

Reputation management has never been more important and more difficult than it is now, and the support of a qualified and professional PRP, whether in-house or from a consultancy, has become indispensable.

PRPs are trained in understanding various audiences and using communication effectively to manage difficult conversations with stakeholders. Many small to medium size businesses and even large enterprises still view the services of Public Relations Practitioners (PRPs) as a nice-to-have and not a must-have. A lack of understanding of the PR function results in many companies only hiring PRPs when faced with a disaster, instead of hiring them to manage and control possible hazards, thus preventing future disasters and crisis situations.

Both in-house PR teams and PR consultancies have a vital role to play. Consultancies can fill a gap by providing the additional skills or resources lacking within the in-house PR team and can support and complement the existing PR activities of the company. However, only an in-house PR team can provide companies with the PR foundation that is needed in all organisations in the 21st century.

Below are five reasons why all companies should have an in-house PRP or PR Team:

1. They serve as company and product experts

The in-house PRPs are privy to private and sometimes sensitive company information, information that is not and cannot always be shared with a PR consultancy. Having all the information at hand, allows for the employee to make informed decisions with all the information at hand. And in cases where the employee works with a consultancy, they can guide the consultancy in the right direction without disclosing private company information.

2. They serve as experts on the unique PR needs of the company

The in-house PRP is not only an industry expert, they also have in-depth knowledge and understanding of the company's product, services and brand identity. A PR consultancy won't have the same abundant knowledge of a company's DNA, because consultancies work with varied brands and depend on the limited information provided to them by their clients and the external (and often edited) information available to them. The in-depth knowledge of the in-house PRP coupled with the additional resources and skills provided by the consultancy can assist the company in covering more ground with their PR activities. The in-house PRP also serves as source of knowledge to whom the PR consultancy can refer for guidance.

3. They represent one brand

In-house PRPs are the in-house representatives for one brand only – the company where they are employed. This should be a crucial factor for companies to consider. When your company is in hot water, you want to be able to turn to someone immediately, someone whose sole responsibility and interest is your company's reputation. PR consultancies can provide the PR employee with their objective viewpoint (their outside perspective) to assist in balancing the response during a crisis.

4. They use their Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as the benchmark

The KPIs of the PR employee is, or rather should be, directly linked to the company's strategic goals, and all their PR activities should be in alignment with these KPIs. Hiring a PR consultancy without having an in-house PRP means that the PR consultancy will be managed by someone who most probably does not understand public relations. The marketing, sales or events managers are often placed in charge of managing the PR consultancy, and although they might be subject experts of their own line of work, PR is a specialised skill which is often misunderstood by other function managers in the organisation. The PR consultancies are therefore not optimally utilised, and are tasked with duties that do not necessarily support the PR-specific strategic goals of the company.

5. They bring it all together

In-house PRPs constantly remind company role players about the importance of relationships, and managing all company stakeholder relationships with sensitivity, including internal and external. They provide daily reminders of how various company activities and omissions impact the company reputation, regardless of the department in which those activities and omissions occur. In-house PRPs bring it all together and they keep it all together by advocating for the PR function in

the organisation, something a PR consultancy is unable to do simply because they are not at the company every working hour. The in-house PRP can serve as a valuable source of direction and information to PR consultancies when the consultancy is tasked with handling special PR projects. The PR employee will be able to articulate the unique PR challenges faced by the company which no one else will be able to do.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both in-house PRPs and PR consultants have a role to play in organisations. However, it is not practical to build a solid PR function for your company using only an external PR consultancy, but it is possible if you only had an in-house PRP.

There are increased benefits to having both an in-house PRP and a PR consultant as this will help your company cover more ground to get your message out.

If you're a big corporate and you have the budget, hiring both a PR employee or team, and consultancy would be the ideal way to go. You'll then build and retain internal PR knowledge and skill while having access to the expertise and resources of a consultancy that can fill the missing skills gap.

If your company is in the start-up phase, then a PR consultancy is the best route to follow, as your company may not have the capacity yet to employ an in-house PRP, and you probably only require smaller projects on an infrequent basis.

You need to decide what your company needs and can afford, the completion of once-off projects/gimmicks, or a PR foundation with long term benefits that protects your brand.

ABOUT JENNILEE PEREMORE

Jennilee Peremore-Oliver is an award-winning media and communications professional, who started her career in 2009. In 2017 she founded the Communications Agency, Jenniemore (Pty) Ltd. She has worked with brands in the corporate, media and non-profit sectors.

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