

Choosing a Public Relations agency as a long term business partner

"With Public Relations becoming more and more important as a strategic business tool, it is essential that clients choose carefully when selecting a PR partner. Ideally this process should result in a long term relationship for both parties," says Johanna McDowell, MD of Integrated Communications, one of the leading PR and marketing communications agencies in South Africa.

When Integrated Communications was formed 10 years ago, the agency, assessed the levels of professionalism in the South African PR industry and found that most companies that used PR agencies were dissatisfied with the service levels they were receiving.

It would have been easy to blame the PR companies for this, but the reality was that the clients were equal fault. It appeared that clients simply did not ask enough questions, obtain good evaluations or demand results from their PR campaigns or their appointed PR agencies.

McDowell continues, "I think that a lot of the time, clients have not known what questions to ask as they are often unaware of the level of results that can be obtained through good, carefully planned and implemented campaigns. There should be no mystery to PR, the days of vague delivery are long gone. "

As a starting point, Integrated Communications recommends that clients look at the following six-point checklist when selecting a PR partner:

1. Think through carefully why you need a PR agency

A good PR brief can help to clarify your objectives if you explain your thinking on paper. It is an essential and it will also shape the type of PR firm you need.

2. Consider the type of experience you need

This is usually determined by the nature of your company - what you do, where and how you trade. Don't select an agency that specialises in consumer PR if you run a business to business company. If you are a South African company setting up in Europe, look for an agency with established European channels and a strong track record already.

The closer the fit, the more likelihood of success. Always ask an agency for their Credentials document. Every agency has one - it is a summary of services, strengths and existing clients.

3. Select the size of the agency with care

You want to be the first thought on a Monday, not the last thought on a Friday. You want to be a valued client so choose an agency that will value your business. Generally speaking smaller agencies should service smaller companies. Make sure the agency has capacity to handle your account.

4. Make sure you meet the doers

Make sure you have confidence in the people you will deal with on a daily basis not simply the directors or

new business hot shot. PR is about building working relationships between agency and client, agency and media and media and client. If it doesn't work at a personal level, the professional relationship won't either

5. Be clear about costs, expectations and references

Value for money is important, but so are results. When agreeing fees, agree performance expectations to Make sure you know what the fees cover and what they do not. Ask to approach existing clients for a reference, and resist simply calling the first reference that is offered to you.

6. Agree the evaluation criteria for the agency up front

The evaluation aspect of a relationship between client and agency is extremely important and must be agreed at the outset of the relationship. These criteria should be committed to paper, and a six month review date set up immediately.

Concludes McDowell, "Professional standards for PR need to be driven higher and higher in order for the industry to succeed. In tough economic times like these, clients simply cannot afford to have to unnecessarily changes agencies. If the selection process is handled carefully, the resultant relationship can be extremely rewarding and long term."

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