

How to Select a Public Relations Firm

When you are ready to hire a public relations agency, choose the firm that is right for you.

- ✓ **First, evaluate your own company's needs** to clarify why you want support. Fully understand what a PR firm can do for you, how public relations is different from advertising and marketing yet complementary, and how they impact one another.
- ✓ **Second, explore different options within your budget.** It's essential that your firm be a partner, not a vendor. You should research the staff and company history, and narrow your selections based on experience and chemistry. Take the time to explore each agency's strengths, weaknesses and proven capabilities. Agencies vary in size, experience and fee structure. Determine which agency best fits your needs, budget and style.
- ✓ **Third, agree on reasonable expectations and the plans to reach them.** These plans should be specific yet flexible. Strategies change, and unexpected opportunities will arise.
- ✓ **Fourth, fully understand how PR firms work.** To be successful, they should not merely work for you, but with you.
- ✓ **Finally, learn how to get the most from your new representatives,** and how to measure the results of their activity.

Your needs

To determine your company's need for outside help, ask: Why do you need a public relations agency? Perhaps your opportunities are great and your staff is small. Put another way, your company simply wants one of three common goals of PR programs: to change or reinforce a behavior or a perception, increase your bottom-line, or create strategic relationships. Perhaps, your program is hampered by target audience misconceptions or lack of awareness. Know what PR firms do and what they can do for you. Externally, they can improve your relationships with prospective customers, your distribution network, the financial world, government and the community at large. Within your organization, better communications can boost employee morale and productivity. A public relations firm will provide you with objectivity, creativity, experience and extra hands to do the job. Among the services an agency can provide are research, strategy development, publicity, marketing communications, special events, publications, web enhancement, trade, technical, and investor relations, consumer and environmental affairs, government and international relations, and institutional advertising. An agency can help with salesperson, speaker and media training, speechwriting and platform development, crisis communications, corporate identity and issues management. PR firms can also "close the sale." They can build on the excitement created through your advertising techniques by enhancing, deepening and broadening the reputation of your company. PR also greatly influences "word of mouth" and can help regulate rumors or uncertainties about your company.

Shopping for a firm

Start by making a list of three to five firms recommended by colleagues, trade associations, and public relations or web directories. Call the companies for brochures and look up their websites for a feel of how they present their capabilities. Experience, Experience, Experience. The PR executive working on your account must grasp your business and your media immediately. Within "experience," we include "creativity" and "caring." Are the account executives going to give you a stream of new ideas? Does the owner really want the business? Does the staff have the experience to appreciate what it doesn't know and has to learn? During the shopping period, avoid "new business" experts, also known as salespeople; deal instead with the account executive who will be responsible for your organization --- the people who will be handling your account. They're the staff you have to evaluate. The size of the agency means little; the "people" aspect is far more important. Who will be working on your account? How much of their time will you get? Do you feel comfortable with them? Look at their current client list to give you a more accurate idea of what the firm will do for you. Some companies put emphasis on media contacts, yet their contacts are always changing because the turnover is so high. Consistency with the media and placements are more important. Take a look at the agency's past client list. Phone a few of them and ask their opinion. You might even call former clients to learn why they terminated their relationship. Some people recommend getting competitive bids, but beware: agencies may present dog-and-pony shows — dramatic fluff, not practical day-to-day reality. Ask for a written proposal. Avoid glitz and glamorous slide presentations. Go with facts, creativity and substance.

Budgeting and planning

An account executive will work with your firm on a daily basis to develop specific plans and budgets, to implement plans, report results, evaluate and suggest follow-up. A firm has one thing to sell — time. It sells staff time, just as a legal or accounting firm does. You can buy this time in several ways. Monthly Fee: A monthly fee for services, generally based on an estimate of all the work your organization might need. Per Project: A project fee for a product introduction, plant dedication, press event or other special activity. Retainer: Hourly charges for staff time. Often, agencies use this method with a minimum monthly fee.

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PUBLIC RELATIONS

Sometimes these three arrangements are combined. In any case, set aside 15 percent of your budget for unexpected opportunities. Out-of Pockets: Costs for out-of-pocket expenses, such as long-distance phone bills, printing, entertainment and photography, will be added to time charges, some with a mark-up of 15 to 20 percent for handling and billing.

How it works, handling expectations

The most common tools are publicity, speaking engagements, brochures and other materials, and special events: such as trade shows, seminars, open houses and user groups. A PR firm has expertise in these areas, but its most important contribution will be strategic thinking — creating new programs or messages that add a whole new dimension to meeting your goals. Don't expect too much too soon for too little. The behind-the-scenes work is far more extensive than you realize. Let the agency know your thinking early so they can contribute ideas before you finalize your plans or budgets. Be aware of the long lead times for important publications (over six months); publicity usually takes much longer to materialize than outsiders expect. On the subject of time, determine how much of their work will require your supervision. Ask how much time this might involve. Use the full range of your agency's communications experience. Publicity may be at the heart of your interest, but it's only a small portion of the services you can profit from. Encourage the agency to advise you on strategy. Consider your public relations team as part of your management team. Expect them to initiate action, be resourceful and attentive and know your business, industry and marketplace. Benefit from your PR firm's candid advice; allow them to serve as your critic and to raise your level of expectation.

What you'll get for your money

Public relations is a wonderful opportunity, partly because the field is still largely unexploited. An assertive company will get its money's worth several times over. The firm will carry out an agreed-upon plan. Your job is to provide continual input and monitoring, to ensure that the work is on target and within budget. You can measure the publicity part of the program quantitatively, by counting clippings or inquiries. To evaluate your overall program is to simply apply good management practice, evaluating a public relations service the way you would your legal, accounting or architectural service. How does the firm report progress? Do you have regular meetings with them to assess action, objectives and results? Is the account staff professional? Above all, keep your public relations firm informed about your developments every day or week. And be perfectly honest; tell them how you feel about their performance. Daily contact is important.

Hiring a PR Firm --- A Five-Point Checklist

1. **Define measurable public relations objectives.** Examples are more sales inquiries or getting a favorable editorial in the local paper. An objective is an "end" while the means to the end is accomplished through strategy and tactics.
2. **Understand what outside help you need to achieve these objectives.**
3. **Before interviewing, list the information you need to make your choice as well as information the prospective firm should have to prepare its case including:** audiences you want to reach (your markets); past and current efforts that could affect the relationship; a rough budget guideline and; examples of work for similar objectives and audiences.
4. **Learn the PR agency's account-management process and quality-assurance procedures.**
5. **Do not confuse how good the agency is in pitching for new business with how well it will serve your needs.** Ideal presentations by prospective firms are informal discussions that illustrate their ways of thinking and capabilities, not formalized, sophisticated presentations.

ARMSTRONG and Associates helps their clients get positive bottom-line results by strategically building, maintaining and enhancing the integrity of their reputations and relationships. You can improve your public image, get and keep all the clients you can handle, stay out of court, build goodwill in your community, handle any crisis — when you properly plan and execute your public relations strategies! Perhaps, you're an accountant, doctor, lawyer, engineer, a consultant, a small business owner, motel proprietor, restaurant owner, the owner of a resort or marina, or a non-profit organization or governmental agency -- and you want to do measurably better when it comes to your public relations, public involvement, communications and marketing, yet you struggle with how to do it better and how to do it right. If you want help in designing, implementing and conducting realistic, practical, tried and proven public relations and marketing strategies that will enhance, maintain and improve your reputation while positively impacting your bottom-line, then look no further.

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