

## Do Your Due Diligence in Hiring a PR Firm

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As a small business owner, I'd like to make it easier for my sales people to get in the door with new potential buyers. I've heard that public relations might be worth trying. I don't have a marketing budget, and don't know what this will cost. Help!

Public Relations is a very broad subset of a very broad topic, called marketing. At its best, PR can open the door for you to shine at conferences, win awards and become an expert in your field. PR can help your company break into new markets, bolster awareness with existing or potential buyers, attract new employees and make it easier to form industry alliances. At its worst, PR can be a black hole into which you throw lots of money and achieve very limited results.

When considering PR, shop around. Gather information. Set realistic expectations to help you gauge progress in this often intangible area of marketing. Deciding what you can, and can't afford to risk is also crucial.

Talk with your peers to find out what they've done for PR. If you find that a competitor or key vendor keeps popping up, make inquiries. Do they have a staff person who is working on PR? Do they have a firm promoting them to media and industry outlets? Other than being good at what they do, what are they doing to get noticed?

For example, I know of one firm that decided they wanted to win an industry award. They planned for several months. They got clients, vendors and employees to write letters of recommendation to the award committee. They achieved an honorable mention, positioning them next to a very prestigious group of players in their industry. Then they mailed the announcement article to all of their customers and prospects.

If you're thinking of hiring a PR firm, do your homework. You'll find prices range all over the map. Talk with many firms about how they do what they do. Don't fall for a pitch. Peel the apple and get to know the firms you're talking to.

Ask for a list of references. Look for related experiences. Ask yourself, how likely is each PR firm to "get" and convey your company's unique story. What can they teach you about PR?

Inquire about PR firms' databases. How many contacts do they have with writers, editors and publishers in radio, tv, print and internet outlets. How relevant is their list of existing connections to your industry. Check the media's opinion of the firms you are considering. Are they known and respected by writers and editors. Do they sit on any media advisory board: this goes to the subject of commitment to the craft

and ability to function as an insider.

Look at campaigns they've done for others. Look at writing samples. Do they put together clear, concise, understandable press releases? Did those releases turn into published stories? How did the PR firm relate their actions to success of their clients' firms, and over what period of time?

Remember, like all marketing, PR is meant to increase or stabilize sales, making it easier, faster, or cheaper to acquire more, and better, clients. At the same time, PR is not going to get the job done all by itself. If PR makes the phone ring, you'll still have to have someone pick up the call and do something effective to turn that into sales.

One mistake many firms make is they don't think through the chain of events that relate to PR. Make your people aware of news about your company, so they're ready to respond to customer and prospect inquiries. Tell your receptionist about the priority for handling PR inquiries. If a writer calls for an interview or a quote, you may only have an hour or two to respond. If your receptionist doesn't know the urgency of the situation, and the message sits, that's wasted opportunity.

Set up a budget for PR. If your funds are limited, start by writing some case studies, or hiring a



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firm to pitch a specific story to a specific media group. Ask your staff to identify magazines your customers read, that you should be targeting. Get to know the editors personally.

If you can afford to hire a firm, define what you want to achieve, and how you'll use those results to improve sales. Relate the projected cost of PR over a 1 – 2 year period to your forecast for sales growth. Define what you want: to rank higher within your industry, to promote something special that makes your firm unique, or to demonstrate your success by promoting your clients' use of your product or service. Be prepared to experiment and make changes until you find a winning combination.

Looking for a good book? Try Public Relations, the Complete Guide by Joe Marconi.

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