



SIX TIPS FOR WORKING WITH A PR AGENCY.

WHAT IS PR ALL ABOUT?

PR seems to be a bit of a mystery for firms in data, research and insight, which might be why the overall profile of the industry is a bit, well, tired...We are often asked about our PR services, and very often clients have little or no idea of what PR is all about.

So, begs the question, what is PR all about? The one word answer is reputation. You may have heard the anecdote about a boy and a girl on a date. In the first scenario, the boy says to the girl “I am fabulous; intelligent, athletic and ambitious. Marry me”. That’s advertising. In the second scenario the boy says “I am fabulous; rich and well-connected”.

That’s promotions. In the third scenario, the girl says to the boy “I’ve heard you are fabulous; let’s get married”. That’s PR. So it’s all about building your brand, generating awareness and positive associations with your company.

PR is not about direct sales, although the content developed for use in PR can also be used for promotions and direct marketing.

Without suggesting everyone becomes an expert, if you are thinking of working or are already working with a PR agency, here are some key things you really need to know in order to get the best out of that relationship.



DISCUSS AND AGREE WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE AT THE OUTSET.

Sharing goals and expectations will help the agency achieve your targets. Tell the agency what your business strategy is and ask how they can help you. PR is good for raising profile and generating awareness. It sometimes builds to getting you on pitch lists and/or direct client interest. But as we see from the anecdote, that's not the primary reason to do it.

In order to understand if PR is working, you need to do some kind of benchmark study to understand your reputation at the outset, work out how you want to change, and track that. We usually carry out some short benchmarking interviews with key

influencers before we start, but you might have some external awareness or brand studies an agency could use.

We also often break targets down into smaller measureable units which include things like media coverage, social media shares and followers, web traffic, conversions, sales, etc. Very often we need our clients to share these or put things in place to be sure to measure them, and tell us. But more broadly you need to discuss and agree these elements and how you will understand success together with your agency before you start.



COMMUNICATE PLANS, IDEAS AND PROGRESS.

It's all too common for the PR agency to work with their immediate client in the marketing team to develop a fantastic campaign which no one else in the company knows about. We've won phenomenal coverage of a study in the target media, which totally poleaxed our client's sales team and led to a few red faces when several clients called to find out more about the research and ask for meetings. In spite of weeks of build-up and planning, the release being cleared by seniors, and us reminding them, the marketing team had forgotten to tell the sales and accounts teams what was going on.

In addition, you will get a lot more benefit from all your wonderful coverage if you use it and share it. Indeed, your sales team should use the coverage to open conversations and reinforce relationships with clients. You are missing a trick if you don't share widely internally and externally.

Most importantly the PR content should come from your core business and offer. We are not in the business of sticking lipstick on a gorilla; we need to ensure that the exposure we get reflects the business itself, not a fantasy image of it. Which gets on to the next point.

3



HAVE A DIFFERENTIATED BRAND AND OFFER.

All products and services should meet quality standards. Cars shouldn't break down. A restaurant should not poison you. These are (literally) hygiene factors. But they are not going to make a client excited about your company. Very often in technology and insight, we are expected to communicate something that is blindingly obvious the company should be doing anyway. Like improving the buttons on a desktop portal. Or allowing data to be exported more easily. Or, dare I say it, delivering good quality sample. Yes, fine, but in spite of these things potentially being hard for your development team to deliver, it's only bringing you in line with the other restaurants that don't poison you.

Announce these things, sure, but don't make out they are the biggest thing since sliced bread.

Your agency should know you and your market/sector well enough to be able to help you define and understand what it is you should be focusing your stories on. It should help you define what is different about you and it should recommend proactive PR messages and ideas that support that. You need to be open and indeed helpful in developing and communicating that position and messaging, if possible involving a broader team than only marketing. Which leads to my next point.

4



BE REALISTIC.

You are an insights agency, or maybe a technology company or a data or panel company working in the insights industry. You are not Facebook, or Trump or a member of the Royal Family (if you are then greetings, my own PR is working well!). Outside of the MRX trade media (of which more below) you are not known. Your PR agency will be fighting for any kind of attention for you with every single other insight agency, technology start up, data or panel company in existence. Don't believe any PR who flatters you and tells you otherwise. A non MRX trade journalist will lump all these companies in together (including tech, panel, data analysts etc, etc.) under a generic 'market research' heading; chances are they will call you a market research company even if they have been informed otherwise. So be realistic, your agency should get you coverage if you have followed the advice above, but you are not always going to be the feature story and you should be pleased to get a mention when you first start your PR journey.

We know you want to be in Wired or The Wall Street Journal, and it may even help with sales and might impress your investors but bear in mind the vast majority of people who buy data, research and insight read the trade media; not the tech and international business press or even the marketing media. So if you want to sell your new service you'd be better off defining and targeting your MRX audience and the media they consume than pushing your agency for the Financial Times.

Finally, within the MRX trades there are very limited opportunities for news stories – for example, there are just three US and UK publications that cover news. That's it. And that's why we often focus on using research and opinion pieces as well as thought leadership presentations, webinars and a host of other ideas, in order to generate broader coverage and exposure.



GIVE IT TIME.

So as we can see, when you start on your PR journey you need to be realistic. If you have done no PR in the past you will be lumped together with all the other 'research' companies. Building a reputation takes time. It takes time to establish legitimacy and elevate you above the crowd. Most PR firms will not do one-off projects for a client as the time needed to a) get to know the company, b) define and package the story, c) pitch and introduce the client as well as the story to the media, and d) follow up, is out of proportion to the results. Which is why PR agencies work on an ongoing monthly retainer basis with clients. This means committing to at least six months – and you should not expect results in the first three months. But bear with it. Give the PR agency time to do their job – which will often involve chats with the target media, researching targets and topics, and coming up with interesting angles and stories. They need to win the trust of journalists on your behalf, and in every case these journalists will have no interest, no time and little brain space for you. Also, if a PR does reach out to the media, it doesn't mean you will be

included in next month's or even next week's issue. There is a lead time with all media – from a few days with bloggers, to three to six months with magazines. Unlike advertising, PRs cannot control the content or timing of coverage. They will inform, influence, and encourage coverage, but what comes out, and when, is up to the editor.

Finally, on the topic of time, please be responsive. If your PR has taken weeks to get a journalist interested in an interview with you or has some follow up questions for a tight deadline, it is more than frustrating when it takes days, not hours, to get a response. Ultimately bear in mind that the PR's relationship with the media is what you are paying for. So the PR is never going to compromise that just to please you. For example, we often have journalists ask us for research and data to include in their pieces (they know us as a reliable source). We are only going to ask a client we trust to provide us with that data. If you are not responsive, you are not going to make the grade.



LET THEM DO THEIR JOB.

You are paying the PR agency as experts. So listen to them and take on board their recommendations. Expect them and encourage them to challenge your assumptions.

Researchers are often good copywriters, but it's a very different style of writing for research reports than for the media. So expect the agency to change your copy and don't be a prima donna if they do.

Above all, it's not a good idea to attempt to cut costs by telling them you will give them

the content for them to pitch. Every single pitch a good PR does will be honed for a particular journalist or publication. Even a press release needs to be drafted in a certain way for the right audience. The PR will have to edit your copy whatever, so pay them to do it and let them do their job. It will be quicker and you will get better results. Trust your PR agency and realise they want to do a fantastic job for you. A PR firm is driven and motivated by the coverage it wins for its clients. Bear in mind, we want to get coverage that drives our client's sales just as much as they do.

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