

SHRM

April 19, 2007

By Lin Gresing-Pophal

Should Consultants Look Inward Before Seeking a PR Firm?

HR consultants know that a major part of their time investment is involved in marketing and public relations. That is how business is built in the consulting field. But should consultants do the PR themselves, or are there opportunities to out-source at least a piece of this process to others, specifically to PR firms?

These are important questions, and a good starting point in finding the answer is an exploration of the HR consultant's core competencies, says Bob Kustka, who operates an HR consultancy, Fusion Factor, in Boston. Kustka says he started the business with no PR help but soon realized that the business would grow faster-and that he could spend more time consulting-with the help of a PR firm. He hired The Ictus Initiative, a Boston-based marketing and PR firm. While Kustka says he had been fairly successful promoting himself for two years, the PR firm helped to accelerate the process.

HR consultants need to assess their core competencies honestly and make sure they are spending their time on the highest value activities, Kustka says. That might or might not mean personal selling and self-promotion. "Too often, I see entrepreneurs waiting too long to get services that will accelerate their growth. And, when I ask them why, they reply that they can't afford it yet," he says. "The old adage that you have to spend money to make money holds some truth here," he adds. Consultants need to examine their cashflow and determine what a reasonable amount to invest is and what would be expected as payback from that investment. "If you want to take your business to the next level, you've got to take some chances," he says.

Know the Objectives

Yin Chang is CEO of Phoenix Marketing Communications, which is based in Montclair, N.J., and offers PR services. "The one major issue that no one asks is 'what are my objectives?'" Chang says. "This is the first question that should be asked, since it will determine whether PR is the right tactic to take," he says. Chang emphasizes that PR is a tactic, not a business strategy. The strategy itself has to fall out of the business and communication objectives, he adds.

Taking a chance on PR representation can pay off big dividends, or none. It depends on the objectives of the HR consultancy.

Michael Shmarak is principal of Sidney Maxwell Public Relations in Chicago and has done PR programs for large and small organizations, including HR practitioners. HR consultants need to think carefully about what they want PR to accomplish for them, and that means more than just generating awareness, Shmarak says. Objectives need to be framed in measurable terms and considered in terms of the value of the outcomes desired. "PR practitioners would be wise to advise companies about all of the potential options among the marketing mix and how they could play out in communicating the desired objective," he says. "I have told several companies not to hire us because they needed other services to amplify the message."

Roger Roeser, an agency owner, national radio show host and a writer for numerous advertising/PR magazines, agrees. The short answer on if a firm should hire a PR firm is "no," because that is a decision requiring "a number of due diligence" actions up front, he says.

What To Watch, And To Watch Out For

Roeser says he too has turned away potential clients when the objectives do not "mesh." In addition, Roeser's agency does not respond to requests for proposals (RFPs) because entities that "blindly" send RFPs to agencies have not done

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their due diligence and homework to find an agency that fits their needs, he says. “There are much better ways to go about finding and securing an agency,” he says.

Roeser welcomes calls from potential clients to discuss needs, costs and areas where they might be able to assist and to address any questions—all at no cost—and advises that this sort of legwork is where HR consultants start their search process. Which agencies or individuals to call, of course, should be based on clearly identified objectives, he says.

Mike Donnell of Donnell Public Relations has spent 20 years with two of the largest public relations firms in the country and 20 years operating a one-person firm. He offers some specific issues to consider when searching for PR representation:

- Geography. An HR consultant that is focused on a specific geographic area will want to find a PR firm that understands that market.
- Longevity. Is the firm new or well established?
- Strategy. What other practice development activities are planned or taking place?
- Technology. Does the firm understand the role of new media in developing clients?
- Specialization. Does the firm specialize in a specific set of businesses or industries?

There is an intangible element of “chemistry” involved as well, Roeser says.

“There are standard things to look for, such as expertise levels and rates and team members,” he says. But a consultant needs to determine if a PR firm fits the consultancy’s needs and “jibes” with its chemistry, he says. In addition, look for the passion for the work exuded by an agency as well as general creativity and willingness to be proactive and present fresh ideas, he says. What a consultant firm wants to know is if an agency takes the time and effort to understand the organization and tie the work of the agency to the overall goals of the consultancy, he says.

Looking for Results

While chemistry matters and the relationship between an HR consultant and PR advisor needs to be a relationship of trust and mutual respect, it is results that matter.

Susan Harrow is a former publicist turned media coach and the author of *Sell Yourself Without Selling Your Soul: A Woman’s Guide to Promoting Herself, Her Business, Her Product, or Her Cause With Integrity & Spirit* (HarperCollins, 2003). Ask tough questions when making a selection, and dig into the answers that are supplied, Harrow says. For example, while a PR firm might look like it has done credible work, an HR consultant should ask if those successes are recent, she says. In addition, the results provided to sell the PR firm are not always real, she says. For example, a PR firm might claim to have gotten a client into a Wall Street Journal news article, but it might have been only a one-line quote, she says. More important than the quote are a PR firm’s responses to questions like: “Did that quote help build their business?” Or “What effect did the PR have on their company? Did it increase sales or credibility?” In addition, responses from the PR firm should be verified, she says. Ask to speak to “a disgruntled client” in addition to the “happy camper clients” that are generally presented as references.

The due diligence does not start as an HR consultant searches for a PR firm. Prior to the search, HR consultants should have established sound and specific methods of measuring the performance of the PR firm or representative.

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Liz Dunavant is a senior account executive with Fleishman-Hillard Inc., in Kansas City, Mo. Prior to joining the agency, she worked on benefits communications in two corporate settings. “The most important piece of advice I have for HR professionals is to request that the agency provide a plan of action with measurable steps,” she says. Metrics should be identified at the beginning so that all work is aligned with the desired result and the consultant can ensure that he or she has gotten what was paid for, she says.