

Choosing the right PR Company

By [Louise Marsland](#), issued by [Grapevine Communications](#)

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Is it chemistry or kismet or just plain business sense? In choosing the right PR company for the job, clients need to consider a variety of tangible issues.

Louise Marsland reports: With the proliferation of multi-media options over the past decade, the communications industry is showing much diversity of growth worldwide. The pressures of operating in a global village and the instant results that come with it, as well as increased corporate governance emphasis and stakeholder activism, demand that public relations is a priority in the boardroom.

Client needs are paramount, but clients must be clear on their objectives when hiring a PR company and specific outcomes need to be unpacked upfront.

The most important advice seasoned PR practitioners have for clients when choosing a PR company, is to know what their objectives are at the outset. "Clients should ask themselves what they would like to accomplish from a PR strategy and whether they understand the meaning of PR. Interview at least three companies, and then decide whether an internal practitioner can do the job or whether to outsource these requirements." Advises Pete Unsworth of The PR Team. "There are advantages to both and it depends entirely on the clients needs, infrastructure, product and budget."

In fact, first up, clients have to make sure that PR is the appropriate management tool for achieving their objectives, says Lucien Vallun, MD of Fleishman-Hillard SA. And if a client is serious about succeeding with a PR campaign, senior management must be fully briefed and supportive of the PR initiative. "Assemble the necessary resources - financial and human - and ensure that the PR Team knows exactly what is expected of them and understands where they fit into the overall mission of the business.

However, Grapevine Communications MD, Marie Yossava, points out that it is important for clients to consider the amount of investment they can offer in terms of time and manpower, not just in terms of the monetary value. "Only when clients truly understand the value of PR will they allocate the correct resources and realise the true potential of effective communication for their company's image and growth. But PR is not a quick fix, as Marilyn de Villiers, manager: PR Division, Citigate Johannesburg explains, "PR is a process of building relationships and credibility with the media. What you put in is what you get out. Relationships are far easier to destroy than create - so they have to be worked at continuously."

A Checklist

The main considerations or questions a client should keep top of mind when choosing a PR company, according to expert PR practitioners interviewed by Advantage are:

1. Does the PR Company understand my business?
2. The level of strategic input versus tactical support.
3. Have they got the right people - in terms of experience and expertise? How senior are the people who will be working on my account?
4. Can they reach my target market?
5. How does the agency intend to quantify their value?
6. Do they have the capacity to handle my business and do they really want it.
7. It is essential that an agency can map communications activity to an organisations business strategy.
8. Experience in the relevant type of PR and industry knowledge..
9. Do they know the media?
10. Ask how they bill for time and costs?

11. Call for Client testimonials, references, credentials pack, case studies to demonstrate the PR company's ability to deliver on a brief.

For Marcus Brewster Publicity, it also comes down to chemistry: "I think a certain amount of chemistry is important in selecting a PR company. Chemistry could be defined as a mutual interest in the client's industry, a sense of humour, a good rapport and a liaison platform. I think clients should drill PR firms upfront on how they would define the success of the campaign - this sets a benchmark for evaluation down the line."

What should you expect, realistically?

As Lara Magnus from Orange Ink asserts, ROI from a PR is a pressing issue at the moment, with many companies evaluating their PR strategy to determine effectiveness and impact. "Many agencies still try to demonstrate value through a simple calculation of column space equated to advertising spend, but in my view, this is short sighted for the industry and presents only a limited view of what PR can do for a company. I believe that South African companies should be evaluating the impact of their communications in terms of message penetration and corporate reputation.

Unsworth agrees: "PR's aren't magicians! I think an incredible amount of pressure is placed on PR's when a client demands instant results, or needs something cleaned up. A PR company should know better than to go near a "dangerous" client - one who does not know or is unwilling, to be educated on, PR and what its function is.

One thing remains clear: public relations strategy should be driven from the CEO down. According to the American public relations practitioners' chapter, almost 50% of a company's reputation is linked to the CEO's reputation. Explains Yossava: "There is no question that the communications strategy should be given a great deal more attention and importance and, at best, outlined by CEO's and only then handed over to marketing to be driven on a daily basis. Quite frankly it is time that communications strategy and PR become a part of business strategy in a company, and not in the lower end of the marketing mix.

Magnus believes that too many clients, and PR's too, have failed to understand how the market and communications sector is changing. "PR people also need to focus on what it means to be a true consultant, as doing PR for PR's sake is not cutting it anymore.

As far as timeframes go, a minimum of six months is fair to ensure deliverables are met, say the experts. International PR consultant, Sally Falknow, currently based in the US says: "I have always told my clients that it takes about six months for the first real results to become visible. Even with publicity, the first three months are devoted to research, interviews and contacting editors. Long lead times make it impossible to get your first print to run in a few months. But you can set up deliverables along the way that can be constantly measured.

South Africa companies should be evaluating the impact of their communications in terms of message penetration and corporate reputations. Explains Richard Clarke of Purple Apricot: "In my experience, the bottom line is that the companies that get the best results from their PR, are those that have a strategy in place for where their PR is heading and why they need it.

And when things go wrong for the client and/or the communications company? Communicate, communicate, communicate, communicate! And if all else fails, agree to part ways.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louise Marsland is publisher and editor of Communicate, the only independent media for communications professionals in SA.

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