

How to Pick A PR Agency

August 1990

by Andy Cunningham

There are a good many public relations agencies out there, but finding one that suits you and your business can be a chore. In what follows, I'm going to give you a few pointers and some general information that will make your quest for the right PR agency a lot more manageable—maybe even enjoyable.

Just Looking, Thanks. One tried-and-true way to start your search for a PR agency is to ask other companies for referrals. But not just any other company. Look for companies, similar to yours in size and product line, that project a successful corporate image. An easy way to find them is to skim the business sections of the publications you're familiar with—local newspapers, trade magazines—and ferret out the companies that are getting positive attention. Then call them and ask who handles their public relations. You'll most likely end up with a list of PR agencies that know how to get good press coverage for their clients.

Next, put a competent person in charge of your search, preferably one who will eventually work with the PR firm you choose. You want to make sure that this person understands your company—its image, its current and future products and services—and can articulate what your company expects from a PR agency.

The person who conducts your agency search must also have access to your company's senior management. Direct communication between your future PR agency and those in charge of your business is essential. Make sure the agency you hire understands what your company can afford and how it operates. By giving your agency as much information and direction as possible, you will help it better fulfill its purpose—which is to help you make your business a success. Having a public relations firm that doesn't know your company intimately can be disastrous, especially when that firm begins talking with the press, analysts, and other influential industry figures. Remember, your PR firm is often your first link to those who influence your customers.

If The Shoes Fits... There are four types of PR firms, classified primarily by their size and what they offer. These are free-lancers, boutiques, mid-size firms, and large firms. Mid-size and large firms are generally too expensive for smaller companies, so I'm going to concentrate on free-lancers and

boutiques. These are often the most effective resources for small high-tech companies with big ideas and limited budgets.

Typically, free-lancers carry one or two clients at a time, so they can give those clients lots of attention. And because their overhead is relatively low, free-lancers are affordable. They bill for their time and the value they contribute to your business. In short, you pay for what you get.

In some respects, though, an experienced free-lancer can be just as effective as a larger agency. For example, a free-lancer who has established, credible relationships with key press people and analysts may be all your company needs to communicate its message to potential customers. And remember: there's no reason to purchase more PR than you need.

Boutiques, on the other hand, offer a wider range of services than free-lancers do, but they are, on the average, more expensive. Most boutiques employ between two and twenty associates, including principals, and account and support staff. Management at boutiques is relatively flat—associates work with principals to generate the best possible PR strategies for their clients.

Boutiques have been responsible for helping many notable companies and their products get started in the high-tech arena. For example, Regis McKenna, a boutique that now employs 19 principals and associates, has represented Apple since Apple's inception. Years ago, my agency helped launch Aldus' PageMaker, a product that was instrumental in establishing desktop publishing. Allison Thomas Associates, a boutique from Southern California, represents NeXT, and helped that company get front-page coverage in both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* when the NeXT computer was unveiled in October of 1988. Despite their relatively modest size, boutiques attract some of the sharpest professionals in the business.

Go Ahead and Ask. When trying to decide whether to go with a free-lancer or boutiques, there are a few other issues to keep in mind. With free-lancers, the major issue is accessibility. You want to make sure that the free-lancer you consider is consistently available. Remember, free-lancers seldom have support staff—they answer their own phones, perform their own administrative tasks, etc. Ask them how they deal with the sometimes-complicated logistics of PR work. And ask whether they have an answering service. Seems silly, but it's critical. If your PR person is on the road with a press tour and your company suddenly faces a public-relations crisis, you want to make sure you can get in contact.

With boutiques, you want to know who will actually be doing the work. Boutiques often rely on subcontractors—typically graphic artists and free-lance writers. Are those people reliable and do they

have experience in your industry? You should also find out whether boutique associates have experience in your particular market. If you're a Mac® developer, you probably don't want to hire a boutique that deals exclusively with MS DOS, OS/2, and Windows. You want your agency to know not only your business but the market issues that affect it.

One Last word. Don't underestimate the role public relations can play in developing your company's image and the visibility of your products. Experienced PR people can save you time and money if you let them. But you have to let them. Remember, you're paying a PR firm for its experience, as well as the contacts it will make for you. Think of your PR people as partners and treat them accordingly. Resist the urge to hire people who say "yes" to every suggestion and request you make. If you hire someone to stroke your ego, you may find your company on a fast track to nowhere. You want professionals who will provide valuable market insight and guidance as you plan your communication and marketing strategies. You want people who know your industry, who are self-assured, and who will challenge the status quo.

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