

Make the most of your agency investment

by Louise Armstrong

There's a saying around PR agencies that clients get the results they deserve. This sentiment, usually pronounced at the end of a disappointing campaign, suggests that the client didn't enable the agency to meet its objectives. While this is sometimes the case, most unsuccessful client/agency relationships result from a failure to communicate and agree upon expectations at the beginning.

Hiring an external agency is a great way to extend the reach of a small (or nonexistent) communications department and inject some fresh ideas into entrenched corporate thinking. Large internal PR departments that are stretched thin can benefit by having an agency handle a major new product launch or critical announcement.

The best client/agency relationships are built on trust, mutual respect and good old-fashioned hard work, where everyone knows what's expected of them and both groups get credit for success. The agency team should feel like partners and know instinctively when to push back and when to accept client direction.

Whatever your need, when you hire an agency you deserve to get results that meet your objectives, on time and on budget. I've been on the agency side of several relationships, some of which have lasted several years. The most rewarding of those were based on five crucial factors.

	If you're the client...	If you're the agency...
Define the working relationship	Deal with housekeeping details at the onset so you can focus on results. Establish your budget and if there's not a penny more, communicate this up-front. Decide how you would like to work – a monthly retainer or a fee-for-project basis—and how expenses will be handled. If you decide to add extra tasks mid-campaign, meet to discuss how they will be compensated.	Complete agreed-upon tasks, on budget with no surprises or hidden costs. If the workload is greater than originally agreed-upon or if you have concerns about the budget, let your client know early on so you can decide how to proceed. Provide summaries outlining work completed with your invoices.

<p>Measurable objectives</p>	<p>Be precise about your expectations. Telling an agency you want to “increase your profile” might get you a few stories but it won’t help develop long-term media relationships or contribute to your overall business goals. Clearly state which products/services you most want to promote, who you want to reach and what would constitute a successful campaign for you.</p>	<p>Don’t over-promise. Be honest about the likelihood of achieving your client’s objectives given the news value of the organization, product or service. Help them understand the media environment and the value of consistent, long-term efforts. If you disagree with your client’s suggestions, explain why and offer alternatives.</p>
<p>Mutual trust and respect</p>	<p>Once you decide to work with an agency, you need to respect them as professionals and trust their expertise. Feel free to clarify the motives behind their approach but don’t second-guess them – they know their business.</p>	<p>As guardians of a client’s reputation, you have to be able to guarantee absolute discretion with regards to proprietary information and adhere to confidentiality agreements to the letter.</p>
<p>Information sharing</p>	<p>Give the agency team all the information/stories they need to do their job. This includes background on your organization and the products/services you wish to promote, anything that will enhance the media pitch and reasonable access to company spokespersons for interviews (no matter how short the media lead-time). Help usher documents through the approvals process and meet the timelines you’ve both agreed on.</p>	<p>Make an investment in learning about the client’s organization and its industry by doing your own research. Once the campaign is underway, provide timely status reports as well as honest feedback on how the campaign is going and the likelihood of meeting objectives. The client should never have to chase you down to get information on how their money is being spent.</p>

Flexibility	You have the right to expect top-notch service but understand that the best-laid plans are sometimes hampered by totally-unrelated events (e.g. breaking news stories that become the main focus of all news outlets). Work with the agency to rework your plans accordingly.	Recognize that clients who are new to PR (or just new to your agency) may want to take a conservative approach at first. Don't be disappointed if they think your blockbuster campaign idea is too risky. Over time, and with consistent results, you will earn their trust.
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