

Getting the Most Bang for Your PR Buck With an Outsourced Pro

By Henry Stimpson

Just about every company, large or small, whether a software firm, money manager, manufacturer, insurer, consultant, hospital or zoo, wants to get more coverage in the news media as part of its marketing plan. Having your organization's products, services and people featured in relevant media builds credibility and works hand-in-glove with other marketing efforts.

Who produces the most PR bang for the buck? Is it a staff PR person? A traditional PR agency? Or is there a better choice?

Today, more organizations are using an outsourced public relations professional, an independent contractor who works with a small cadre of clients.

Why are they hiring independents? The advantages include responsiveness, experience, dedication and lower costs for more results.

With outsourcing, a company doesn't pay an employee's salary and benefits, nor the hidden costs of office space, phone lines, computers, furniture and support staff.

A company might not be able to justify hiring a full-time PR person. But it can justify buying the services of a contractor. It then gets the services of a highly skilled professional without any of the obligations of employment.

Staff PR people often get pulled into time-wasting meetings. Internal meetings, memos and e-mail can be so pervasive that a staff PR pro may have little time or energy to court the media.

An independent doesn't have those distractions.

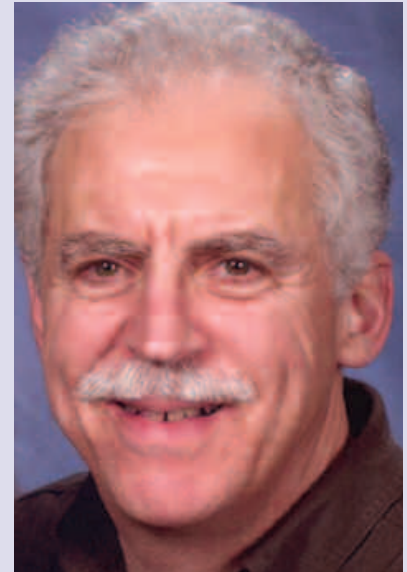
Additionally, having multiple clients gives an independent an advantage with the media. Often, I've spoken with a reporter regarding something that Client A is doing. The reporter wasn't interested, but was very interested in Client B's new service. This kind of give-and-take benefits both reporters and clients.

Outsourcing is also more cost-effective than hiring a traditional agency. Most independent PR consultants have low overhead, working either from a small office or at home. You're buying the individual's brainpower, experience and skill instead of subsidizing a fancy office and perks.

Traditional agencies make their profits by marking up the time of their employees. In most of them, people who are just a few years out of college do the bulk of the work. Though they're modestly paid, as befits their experience, they're billed out at top rates.

For clients, it's a crapshoot. You don't know whether your young account executive will be capable or not. And if you do get a capable person, you're likely to be disappointed in a few months or a year when the individual leaves for greener pastures elsewhere. Now you'll have to educate the new person about your business and industry.

Most independent PR people had many years of successful experience before launching their own practices. The



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outsourced PR person can and should show the client a solid track record.

Responsiveness is another plus. You can get short shrift in a traditional agency if you're one of its smaller clients. Since an independent PR person has a handful of clients, each is crucial, each a big frog in a small pond meriting prompt attention.

A big staff isn't needed. In the old days, you needed a fleet of typists and helpers to do PR. No longer. Communication technology—e-mail, fax, computers and the Internet—lets one person accomplish a lot.

Of course, no individual can do everything. When more arms and legs are needed, an independent PR pro can

simply rent the resources needed for the job, such as media-distribution companies, clerical help, graphic designers and photographers.

Additionally, many independents work with other PR people, who can provide specialized expertise. One example of a network is the Boston Public Relations Sole Practitioners Collaborative, which includes about 30 independents, all members of the Public Relations Society of America.

Our members have special experience in PR for high-tech, financial services, education, healthcare, nonprofits, energy, insurance, small business, minority marketing, real estate, consumer goods, consulting, and law firms. Our practice specialties include media relations, marketing consulting, special-events planning, ghostwriting, media training, crisis communications and more. Together, we form a virtual agency, and clients can retain any one or any combination of us.

How Outsourcing Works

The ability to hire an independent PR pro for a project is one of the advantages of outsourcing. You can start and stop as desired.

Ideally, however, there should be an ongoing program because companies

need ongoing PR. For a continuing relationship, a set monthly fee is the most satisfactory arrangement for both the client and service provider. Unlike hourly billing, this gives the client predictable costs and shows the PR pro that the client is committed.

An outsourced PR person does the same things as a staff professional or traditional agency. He or she can advise on overall strategy and create the PR plan. To implement the plan, the PR pro will establish and maintain personal contact with reporters and editors at relevant media; develop and pitch story ideas; write and place news releases, articles and case histories; set up interviews with your company's executives and experts; and perhaps plan events and press tours.

Beyond media relations, the outsourced PR person may produce your newsletter, Web site, annual report, brochures or other marketing materials.

Does geography matter? It's perhaps slightly preferable to have your outsourced PR person nearby, but getting the right one is more important than proximity.

My fellow Boston-based independents serve both local clients and those in California, Delaware, Florida and

elsewhere. Besides serving Massachusetts-based clients, I've served as the outsourced PR pro for a \$25 billion Manhattan-based financial services company and for companies based in Vermont, Florida and Connecticut. Distance has never been a problem. Most of the time you can do everything by phone, fax and e-mail.

Are there any drawbacks to outsourcing your public relations function to an independent professional? If you have a qualified, capable consultant, there are only two.

First, the individual may not be readily available during vacations. With a little planning, that shouldn't be a problem; anyway, most independents don't take long vacations.

Second, your outsourced PR person might get run over by a truck someday or decide to take off for Tahiti forever. Not much you can do about that, but it's a pretty small disadvantage considering the advantages of outsourcing.