

Telling the story you want to tell

James Hayhurst explores how to work with a reputation agency.

So you want to take the plunge and start working with a PR agency, how can you maximise your chances of success and get the reputation boost you are looking for? Having spent time both agency side and in-house for a variety of global brands here are my top tips.

Do some work on yourself first

Reputations of brands or individuals are built on personality. Before embarking on a communications push it's important to look inside yourselves first. Who are you? What makes you tick? What is your 'why'? What do you want to communicate in the sector and what difference will this make? Being clear on the fundamentals of your brand, its personality, purpose and value, and what the role for communications is, will act as your roadmap for consistency and coherence.

Bring everyone with you

Stakeholder management is hard and time consuming, especially at a professional services firm when you have partners with a vested input who want to have their say. Building consensus is key. Ensure the relevant stakeholders build a strong relationship with the agency from the outset and make sure they have input in the brand strategy so that they are bought into the story. At the other end, remember agencies are relationship experts so let them build strong relationships with key individuals and they can help you through any sticky sign-off procedures.

Understand how brands grow

Be curious about branding, communications and marketing in the widest sense. Understand how consumer brands and celebrities grow their own awareness, fame and sales. How can these principles translate to your sector? Learn about mental and physical availability. Read some Byron Sharp.

Understand what PR is, and isn't

PR can be one of the most powerful tools for boosting reputation. It's less expensive than paid advertising and can have greater credibility. However it isn't magic. You don't have the same control on the message as a poster or TV ad that you've paid for. It's great for showcasing interesting stories and hard won reputations. It can allow you to shine but it can't correct a poor reputation overnight. Reputations are hard won, and easily lost.

Trust your agency

Just like the clients of your firm who see your partners as their trusted advisors, you are going to need to bestow the same trust upon your agency partners. Give them clear direction, be clear on what you are aiming for, uphold high standards and then trust in the agency you have chosen... scary as that may seem.

Invest in the relationship and let your agency in

Your agency can only tell your story effectively if you really let them in and under the skin of your firm. Don't do that thing where they meet everyone for the pitch and then no-one answers their calls whilst expecting them to effortlessly and inspirationally tell your story. Your agency should be questioning and curious, do your best to quench their thirst for information. Just like law or accountancy, reputation management is a people business all about relationships. Invest in yours with your agency.

Write short briefs and be clear on desired output

Make your brief as short and precise as you can with crystal clear outputs that you'd like to achieve. It can often be tempting to put the 'kitchen sink' in the brief but less is more and the best briefs are written in partnership with your agency. Make sure you are clear about what you want the communication to

achieve and be honest about what you can claim and what a future newstream of support points will look like. Finally be honest on what the internal appetite for communications is – will all the partners be behind you when it comes to the final sign off?

Be your true selves

Reputation isn't just skin deep and needs to come from the inside. In today's world clients are after honesty and integrity. They want to see environmental commitments, and a diverse workforce of people who are healthy and happy ambassadors of your firm. These are great stories to be able to tell, and social media is a powerful media in which to tell them, but if you are going to reveal yourselves, make sure it's your true selves, and that it isn't all going to come crashing down when people see that your house isn't in order.

Reputations take time to build

Like all things in life that are worth anything, reputations take time and effort to build. Consistency and commitment are key. Be clear on your long-term objectives, line up your firm behind these objectives and commit to the reputation you want to build. The consistent investment of resources and energy can reap huge dividends over time.

Measure what you treasure

The more clearly you can articulate what you want to achieve and set realistic measurement targets up front, the easier it will be to track progress and keep everyone focussed on how reputation and communications is delivering back into the business.



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