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PR 101

When is it time to get help?

By Gini Dietrich

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Communications should be handled by someone close to your business. But sometimes it pays to bring someone in from the outside.

Even in bad times, smart marketers know how to increase market share and position themselves for the recovery. If you're able to begin aggressive communication efforts now, you'll gain real upside as we come out of the recession.

But one of the most difficult decisions to make, especially while we're still in a recession, is whether to tackle communication internally or to tap external help.

Many communication functions should be handled by the people who are closest to your business. It makes the job easier for outside-PR firms because you have someone dedicated to consistent, and accurate, communication, but it's also difficult for someone from the outside to understand all of the nuances within your business.

That being said, external help is able to provide fresh thinking. The key is to be realistic. On the old TV series "Sports Night," Robert Guillaume's character once said, "If you're dumb, surround yourself with smart people. If you're smart, surround yourself with smart people who disagree with you." The key here is *the best ideas rarely come from a brainstorm of one.*

What you can do on your own

A combination of in-house and outside help is often the best option. Your in-house resources have access to information straight from the source and outside resources can help you see big picture. So following are some things you can do inhouse.

Customer research—Although it is good sometimes to get an outside opinion so your questions aren't leading, you absolutely should play a role, if not the lead role, in gathering insights about current and potential customers. Not only does this information drive communication programs, it also drives product or service development, so it makes sense to be intimately involved in research.

Brand development and management—Communication about your brand has to be authentic.

While a communication firm can help determine which aspects of your brand resonate with the target audience, an outside firm cannot create the brand for you. Particularly today when customers are increasingly skeptical, it's important to be genuine and passionate about what your brand means, and also to be transparent and authentic through all communication vehicles.

Engaging customers through social media—To keep communication transparent and authentic, it makes sense for you to be communicating directly. From blogs to engaging potential customers through Twitter to Facebook pages to writing responses to online articles, in these channels, your customers expect to hear your voice.

Media relations—Even if you have a PR firm, you should maintain close relationships with the media. The main thing is you have to be responsive — you can't wait days, or even hours, to respond to a reporter. For reporters who regularly cover your space, it also advisable to stay up-to-date on what they are covering, which is easy with Google news alerts and the social media networks.

Why hire outside help

To be more strategic—Engaging outside help can save time. It frees you to focus on the business, the customer and the future. But perhaps more important is the different perspectives you'll gain from outside resources.

Proactive vs. reactive—When you're putting out fires all day, it's hard to think about the future, let alone act on it. How many times have you asked your team for ideas, devised a plan, and it sits gathering dust on your desk? Working with an outside firm often ensures your vision actually gets executed.

Specialists—Of course you've heard the saying "jack of all trades and master of none." One of the key benefits of working with an outside firm is the investment it makes in areas of expertise.

Test new communication vehicles—While I highly recommend you test new media channels and try new things, it can be difficult to decide which paths to travel. Good communication firms constantly test new channels, so you will invest less upfront time and money in understanding these channels.

Some things to consider, if you hire outside help

When hiring a communication firm, look for proven results, good references, effective communicators and relevant experience. Outside of these, following are some additional things to consider:

Chemistry—The single most important factor when hiring a communication firm is chemistry. Now I say this assuming you're looking only at firms with the credentials I mention above. If you don't have chemistry with them, it's like the friend whose phone calls you ignore.

Cool under pressure—How will the firm interact with you? What is the firm's work style? How have your contacts handled problems in the past? Treat the firm selection process like a job interview. When you ask tough questions, do you get straight, insightful answers or does it feel more like they are evading the questions?



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Does their homework—Does the firm ask good, insightful questions? Have they done their research? Do they push you and get you thinking? It's in your best interest to hire a communication firm that is thinking strategically about your business from the get-go. There is nothing worse than feeling like you're the only one in the room who is thinking.

Don't be wowed by the cavalry—Unfortunately it's common practice to pull the old bait and switch. Agencies bring in their top people for the pitch and you may not see or hear from them again until it's time to renew your contract. Find out who will make up your day-to-day team.

Getting the most out of the relationship

Of course just hiring outside help isn't the answer to all of your problems. It's a partnership and quite frankly the more you put in, the more you'll get out of it. Here are

some suggestions to make your relationship with an outside firm deliver the most value.

When communicating with a firm, focus on problems not solutions—This may sound counterintuitive at first because, as a business leader, it's in your nature to be a problem-solver. However, resisting the temptation to provide all the answers results in more strategic thinking. If you give your firm a problem without planting a seed, I guarantee you will hear solutions you didn't consider.

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Be an open book—This can range from consumer research and internal communication structure to individual franchisee challenges and analytics on your Web traffic. The more you bring your external communication partner into your inner circle, the better they will be at addressing your business goals.

Finally, be open-minded—Like Jack Nicholson in "A Few Good Men," if you "can't handle the truth," eventually you'll attract communicators who won't give it and you'll be frustrated at the lack of results.

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