

What corporate PR pros should know about agencies

For 25 years, as a corporate communications executive at several of the nation's largest corporations, I knew some things about which I had no doubt. Among them was that most PR agencies simply weren't worth the money that companies paid them.

As the saying goes, if I only knew then what I know now.

Having jokingly told my former colleagues recently that I was going to the "dark side" and actually joining a PR agency, I was not prepared to discover so quickly that I might have been in error with some of my assumptions about the agency business.

Without belaboring the point, I now feel an obligation to prevent others on the corporate side from falling into the same trap.

Here are 10 things that corporate PR execs should know about their agency counterparts:

1. *Agency people understand corporations a lot more than corporate people understand agencies.* It is a survival skill. Agencies lacking this ability don't stick around very long.

2. *If you ever think that priorities change rapidly in a corporation, just try working in an agency.* You'll discover what it really means for someone (i.e., clients) to have you hopping from one project to another.

3. *Most agencies put in more work for clients than they ever expect to bill for.* That's because they really want to do a good job.

4. *Even successful agencies get fired a lot.* It often happens for spurious reasons, so managing them by that implied threat is unproductive on both sides.

5. *PR firms don't like working with your accounting department any more than you do.* As such, with rare exceptions, agencies really try to bill you accurately.

6. *Agencies are used to being treated like hired guns.* However, they do their best work when they're involved in long-term relationships.

7. *Agency people have healthy egos (in a good way) because they are surrounded by other PR people who appreciate what they do.* Which also means that they understand and appreciate what you do, so treat them as colleagues and not like the corporate lawyers and accountants you work with every day.

8. *Agency people are much better at keeping confidential corpo-*

rate information confidential than corporate people are.

9. *Agency people have good instincts.* They know when you're not telling them the entire story, and it frustrates them because it makes it more difficult to do a good job.

10. *Avoid calling the agency business "the dark side."* That is, unless you someday decide to seek refuge with a PR firm.

Of course, all is not peaches and cream in the agency world. After all, there are clients to deal with. And, having been one, I know all the little signs that in my past life I employed with my colleagues to signal that I was not happy with an agency presentation. What a letdown it was to discover that most agency folks know how to "steal signs" better than any baseball coach ever did.

Then there is the subject of crisis communications. As a corpo-

rate executive, I was so sure that no firm could react as quickly as we did in business. Then one day, I got a call from a corporate chairman who asked if our firm handles crisis work. "Of course, we do," I replied. "When would you like to talk with us?"

"Can you handle one right now?" he asked. "And if you can, would you mind sending me an e-mail confirming the confidentiality of our conversation as we are talking, so we can start?"

So at 7:30am, having never met this person, but knowing who he was, I was handling a crisis for a new client with no preparation. We did an excellent job and turned around material and statements almost as quickly as we could produce them. No corporation that I ever worked for could have mustered out so quickly to deal with a crisis. And I get the feeling that for many of my new colleagues in the agency business, this is not atypical of a crisis and how it is handled.

Bottom line? When sitting at the table with your agency counterparts, remember that your agency truly understands what "win-win" means. There is no better motivator for an agency than its understanding that it succeeds only when its clients do.

P.S. By and large, agency people don't covet corporate jobs. I can vouch that it's much more fun on the outside looking in.



Gary Tobin

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