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## **PR Perspective: Building the Right PR Team - An Overview of Internal Versus Outsourced Strategies**

*By Brian Solis*

PR is a necessary component of any successful marketing organization and a critical driver for increasing sales and fueling the overall corporate brand. Tackling a broad and highly complicated evaluation such as this truly requires a dedicated book, of which I'm sure no scientific, proven formula will emerge by the final chapter.

But analyzing the approach behind the two different avenues and combining them with the company goals and budget will provide the insight necessary to build a solid PR team whether it's internal or an external extension of the marketing team.

Once the decision has been made to pursue a PR campaign, the next step is to truly evaluate the company's goals in order to build a realistic approach to obtain them.

### **Investing in the Value of PR**

Executives must start by assessing real value to the marketing function and then assign a real-world budget in order to effectively arm the PR/marketing group for success. All too often executives dilute the value of marketing and PR by viewing it as a luxury instead of an investment, which by default places cost as a driving factor in the creation of a marketing organization.

In that regard, capabilities, experience, and vision should become the driving factors for the development of a results-driven marketing team.

PR as a function has grown beyond day-to-day media relations, press releases, media alerts, and tradeshow. PR has assumed an overarching marketing role that often encompasses brand creation, channel marketing, marketing communications, direct marketing, and product marketing.

Hiring a PR firm or an internal PR person/s that can succeed on these fronts may appear to be an expensive premium, but the old adage "You get what you pay for" holds true. Investing more on the front end can yield higher returns in both near and long term.

### **Evaluating the Need for Internal or External PR**

The debate for which solution is more effective may never finalize, but in the meantime, analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of each may help determine which strategy is right for the organization.

The size of the company and the state of its marketing efforts will determine the next steps for evaluation. Either way, someone within the organization must realize the potential for PR. That person, whether it's the CEO, VP of Marketing or even an internal PR manager, must champion the effort, from inception to day-to-day activities.

Hiring one person internally to lead PR efforts or hiring a small agency or consultant usually gets the ball rolling effectively. The common trait required for a successful program is a mutual understanding of the company product, value proposition, competitors and market wants and

needs. Eventually, the person hired to lead the PR effort, if they're good, will create more momentum than any one person can handle. The need for a larger internal team or the addition of an external extension is the enabler of significant momentum and market visibility.

### **Finding the Right Person/Team for the Job**

Any decision to be made must focus on hiring a person or team with the experience necessary to achieve results. Whether internal or external, company executives must commit to hiring a candidate/s that meet the criteria and display the potential for achievement through the demonstration of proven successes, maintenance of industry contacts, and knowledge of the industry. The goal is to focus on capabilities and then hire to match budget. In most cases the budget may need to be raised or lowered based on the ideal prospects. On the other hand, hiring primarily based on budget - in order to save money for example - will dramatically prolong the delivery timeline for results or prevent them from being obtained all together.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of an Internal Team**

From the 40,000-foot level, one of the clear advantages to building an internal PR group is the fact that the team (or person) is dedicated 100% to the company. They will breathe the company culture everyday, which will allow them to become true spokespersons for the product/s and the company as well as industry experts. They would be focused on the company market, customers, and competitors without the potential distraction of representing other clients. Internal teams also have an opportunity to bond with other departments to extend internal excitement, a little PR for the PR.

Disadvantages for internal staffing depend on the evolution of the company. Experienced candidates may carry a premium salary and eventually, one person usually becomes overwhelmed with all of the potential action items that stem from a successful PR and marketing program. The prospect of absorbing more than one salary to staff a PR team could be daunting, especially when benefits and administration costs are factored into the equation. Another potential disadvantage could be the 'drinking the bathwater' syndrome where internal communications persons lose touch with industry perception because they're too close to the corporate story. The overall reach is also something to consider in this scenario. Internal teams are usually tasked with simultaneous projects, which limits the amount of resources necessary to extend the visibility of the company/product into new, promising markets. As the company grows, the need for PR direction and management becomes pervasive, requiring the need for a virtual "mini" agency inside the company.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of an External Team**

Outsourcing PR carries its own set of pros and cons, of which there are no right or wrong philosophies, only right or wrong decisions based on the team itself.

PR agencies/consultants offer a tremendous potential for offloading the overwhelming task of building an internal PR department from all business administration angles including Information Technology and Human Resources. From a budgetary perspective, a qualified team could deliver more bang for the buck. If the team is knowledgeable about the industry and they have maintained current relations with target reporters, influencers, and analysts, chances are an entire team could be commissioned for the price of one internal salary. A team can focus on an expanded set of opportunities, which will increase the potential for enhanced brand equity. An external team may also provide a balance of internal visibility combined with an outsider's view to provide expert opinions and marketable vision.

Disadvantages surrounding the outsourcing of PR usually focus on the potential distraction from other clients. Depending on the budget size as well as other client events, the team may be pulled away or prevented from focusing on your account. Many times, the fact that most agencies are not "next door" to their clients prevents strong relationship ties from forming. An external team can be perceived as expendable if it is not integrating itself within the dynamics of the internal team. Also, unless the outsourced team is incredibly communicative through an internal

PR champion for the overall PR program, executives and accounting departments have a hard time justifying the expense on a monthly basis.

### **Middle of the Road Scenario**

In my 13 years of agency and in-house PR experience, the most common team structure I have found usually combines a mixture of both internal and outsourced PR services. By hiring an internal PR or marcom manager to manage and direct an external team based on day-to-day company communications directives, the foundation for a scalable, cost-effective, results oriented team is set. In my opinion it allows companies to enjoy the best of both worlds by maintaining someone on staff who is directly in touch with executive management, corporate culture and mission, and also in-step with the leaders of their outsourced team for real-time market feedback, strategy, and direction.

PR in turn can work together to grow alongside the company to provide the day-to-day results necessary to increase sales and brand resonance as well as justifying its existence and expense.

At the end of the day, there are an infinite series of combinations for internal and outsourced PR services and I believe that every executive and communications professional has their preferences based on past successes. What is common throughout every winning initiative is that the right people were involved at the right level at the right price. Whether internal or outsourced, or a combination thereof, building a qualified, motivated, cost-effective, and scalable team are the absolute keys to marketing, and ultimately business success.

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