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For: Real Business

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10 ways SMEs get the best out of PR firms

Make sure your investment achieves the results you want

Among clients and agencies alike, the horror-stories of SMEs' first 'dates' with PR firms are legion – and legendary. So too lifetime scars! Yet today's 7:24 media choice and opportunity makes the potential tantalisingly higher than ever.

Dr. Bill Nichols chaired a mid-size international PR firm. Since selling up, he teaches marketing and communications at University. Not so much poacher turned game-keeper as honest broker, he offers 10 tips for getting the best out of your 'date'!

1. Know what success looks like

If 'PR' is the answer, what was the question? Before picking up a 'phone, know what agency success looks like. If it's 15% more leads, web-site traffic up 33% or 50% more retail footfall, spell it out. But if your outcome is a warm, fuzzy feeling about how a local paper feature might help, keep your cheque-book locked up. It will end in tears...

2. Get your team on the same page

You may be boss but does your team understand/share your vision for PR success? (Sadly most aren't mind-readers). So before briefing anyone, hammer out a one- or two-page standard spec with your sales chief and marketing manager. Set objectives and, above all, a budget. Many report this more valuable than the later campaign itself!

3. All things being equal, choose people you can work with

Marry in haste, repent at leisure, they say. You may love the creative, find the people fun. But these are tie-breakers. Get behind the blarney – you'd expect them to do that well! Convince yourself rather that they 'get it' and are hungry and committed. Will they still be on the job when things aren't working, it's 7PM Friday night and the pub is calling?

4. Give them a wide-ranging, joined up brief

Few SMEs can afford specialists in every area (PR, advertising, online, collateral etc). Even fewer can afford the territorial spats that make the sparks blaming the chippie look alluring. So, if you want to lead with PR, give them full scope. If, for example, you conclude jointly that on/offline PR will only hit eight of ten top targets, don't be horrified if you need to 'buy' ad space for the last two. Old purists hate it but, in the academic trade, we call this 'the new secularism'!

5. Go for logic every time

Ideas are only great if they deliver clearly defined needs. So the PR firm proposes a £10K hospitality event. Yes, you'll enjoy it. Yes, they'll look good. But how and why will it help bring in more punters? Be relentless. Every investment proposition (even 'light and fluffy' ones) should identify return.

6. Go for online depth

Online potential is far greater than website or Facebook page. Real market targeting leverage comes when you configure presence across multiple platforms (from say flickr to foursquare). And it can also maximise your 'community's' value to others. Agencies playing *seriously* in this space are much to be prized.

7. Do a few things well

Be realistic. £10-20K investment doesn't buy the earth. So politely ignore firms promising its delivery. Look for campaigns which offer a few measurable activities - clearly articulated and tightly targeted.

8. Help them create news

Be realistic. We over-estimate our own news value. It's vanity! So, unless your secret warp-drive is ready for launch, understand that most SME news needs packaging – even 'creating' – often around a key individual. Be sure you're happy with this and check how they propose to do it.

9. Time is of the essence

News opportunities always come with tough deadlines. Even the pigeon flying from the Battle of Waterloo knew that the Morning Advertiser closed at 6PM! Today days/hours are minutes/seconds. If you hire a PR agency, recognise that you also live by those rules – however uncomfortable. It may mean stepping out of key meetings or interrupting golf-rounds to answer a few media questions. But it's crucial to success.

10. It's your campaign

And stay on top of things. A single-page bullet point weekly report will suffice. But get one. Check it. And contribute. Remember it's your campaign – not theirs.