



How to brief a PR agency

The first step to hiring a PR agency is presenting a clear brief. A well-written, clear and concise brief will enable a PR agency to present ideas that are relevant and will allow you and your firm to identify what you want from PR at the outset.

This guide offers some insights in to getting your PR brief right.

Understand what PR is and what it isn't

Before you do anything, make sure that you and your colleagues in the firm understand what PR is, what it isn't, and what it can and can't do.

Public relations is one of the most cost-effective tools for improving reputation. It doesn't involve the cost of advertising and can directly engage an audience in a way that marketing can't.

Many people associate PR with appearing in the papers and that is a large part of it, but public relations is concerned with reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. There are many types of PR that go beyond dealing with the media, including newsletters, social media, events, internal communications, community relations and public affairs, to name but a few.

PR can't make you, your service or product credible if it isn't credible in the first place. It can't build a reputation overnight, sustain a reputation that is undeserved or explain away a bad product or service. Nor can it do the job of advertising. The basic role of advertising is to tell and sell, where the basic role of PR is to show and glow!

However, well-executed PR can:

- support business objectives
- influence attitudes
- explain policies
- increase awareness
- focus attention on certain issues
- encourage informed debate, and
- reinforce the sales and marketing effort.

PR doesn't generally win sales but it does create the right environment. In turn this leads to new inquiries and interest and provides external confidence in an organisation, its products and services.

Be clear about what you want to achieve

Ask yourself:

- 1) What does your firm want to achieve over the next two years? Remember, PR isn't a quick fix. As defined by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, it is "*the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics*". The crucial words here are 'planned' and 'sustained'.
- 2) Who do you want to influence? Be clear about who your PR campaign is aimed at. Knowing the audiences you want to communicate with will inform the channels your PR team will use.
- 3) What do you offer and what do you want to be known for? Explain what it is you offer and what the benefits are of your product or service. Articulate why a potential client would use you over someone else.
- 4) How are you going to measure the success of the PR? Media coverage received is an obvious one but other key performance indicators, such as an increase in website hits and social media followers or calls to the firm, could all feature.

Some tips:

Avoid asking a PR agency to come up with ideas without giving them a brief first. It's not fair on the agency and it means you won't get the best out of your meeting.

Try to be clear about any upcoming events, legislation or business developments likely to have an impact on your firm, and subsequently the PR. If these are confidential, you can ask any agency you speak with to sign a non-disclosure agreement.

Establish a budget. Find out what the typical charges are likely to be from any agencies you are briefing. Most agencies you approach should be able to at least provide you with a day rate or typical retained or project fee at the outset so that you can ensure these are consistent with your budget.

Ask about the results they expect to achieve – be wary of those who promise the earth and make sure they demonstrate knowledge and insight of the markets you want to target.

Ask for details of the team that you would work with if you appoint them. Importantly, establish who the day-to-day contact would be and ensure that you will have an ongoing, senior access and are not left in the hands of junior account executives once you have signed on the dotted line.

If your firm is appointing a PR agency for the first time, consider starting the relationship with a project rather than jumping in to a year-long retained relationship. That way you can best assess the understanding an agency has and how they work.

Finally, don't underestimate personal chemistry. You need to feel you can do business with whomever you appoint.

Over time good external PR consultants will feel like an extension of your business and you will probably spend just as much time speaking to them as you do your colleagues.