

You're hired!

SANDRA HEWETT
shmr
sandra@shmr.co.uk



JANE BIDDELL
jbiddell@yahoo.co.uk



A PR agency's favourite words, but how often are they spoken in haste? Two experienced practitioners debate the hiring of external consultants. Jane Biddell speaks for the clients and Sandra Hewett for the consultants.

Should you hire?

Jane

First, consider the potential benefits of hiring a PR agency. These may include raising the firm's profile and/or the profiles of named partners, to become better known as providers of a particular expertise or service, or to lead or contribute to media debates on professional and/or business issues.

Of course, you may already have an excellent in-house team who are able to provide all that your firm requires. However, good, experienced PRs who are prepared to work full-time in the professional services environment are a rare breed and it is likely that at some point you will consider hiring an external agency.

So firstly, set clear objectives and define what you want to achieve. Consider the budget you have available and the expectations that are to be fulfilled. An expectation that your firm will immediately make the front page of the FT is unlikely to be realised.

Sandra

As Jane says, you will look to your in-house resource first, so analyse your situation carefully. For instance:

Do you have:

- A reasonable flow of information that doesn't get media coverage? An agency should increase the success rate but you must establish how to feed the information to your external team.
- No established press office? If they are to run a press office function then you must set up protocols with them and ensure good reporting systems.
- Little or no information flow? This would be an uphill

- struggle for outside people to be effective.
- Define the tasks that don't get done; can they be outsourced as projects?

Test your approach

Jane

If your firm is new to working with a PR agency, then scope out a defined piece of work first to test capability and measure success.

Examples of specific projects could include a new product launch, publication of a book that has industry-wide appeal, or the expectation of a favourable legal judgment which will impact on your clients and the wider community.

Plan the project internally and be clear about which elements you will handle in-house and which will be the responsibility of the PR agency. Will the project manager be the main link with the agency or will someone else take on this role?

To demonstrate return on investment you will need to agree what success will look like and how you will measure it. For example, will coverage in a few key titles be judged sufficient, or is volume of cuttings or mentions, including radio and TV, more important? Defining at an early stage 'what good looks like' is time well spent and will be valuable in future discussions on external communications strategy and budgets.

When hiring

Sandra

A retainer account is usually good value provided the information (and work) flows – but whose job is it to dig the stories out? The marketing staff? Partners? External account manager? A good agency should be motivated to keep the workflow going.

Whichever approach, write a good brief. Think carefully about what you want to achieve and how you will measure it and judge your agency. Get advice if you're not sure.

Some clients send a brief to several agencies asking for a written response, and then narrow it down for presentation. Personally I don't think it's effective to ask for a full response that the agency can't properly research or present. From past experience, you're

never sure what level of response to make and no one likes to give all away before a presentation.

Do ask for credentials and do your research; that should be enough to whittle down your shortlist to three or four max. Try and give all the same information (if one asks more perceptive questions though, that's to their advantage).

You might choose your three on size, but be realistic; a sole practitioner is clearly limited for a large, demanding account and a big City agency will be expensive and not motivated for work under £50,000 a year.

Set a budget or fee range. Be aware that a creative campaign will require more on disbursements such as surveys or events.

Jane

Research is the key – colleagues, people in PSMG and journalists can all give you their view. As Sandra says, size does make a difference. A substantial agency may give you the reassurance factor, but a smaller agency, in theory, is more agile and hands-on. If you have time you should hold exploratory discussions with all the agencies you are interested in. How important would your business be to them? What have they done for other professional services firms? How do the agencies work?

Unless your research into PR agencies has resulted in an obvious frontrunner, put together a pitch document and send it to your preferred shortlist. State objectives, the key people involved and their roles. Set out clearly what you expect from the PR agency, but avoid being prescriptive. The purpose is to give agencies the opportunities to respond freshly with the benefit of their expertise and experience. Provide an indication of the budget you have available.

I differ from Sandra's view on getting to the shortlist. It could well be appropriate to ask for a written response first, but you must decide what you are looking for from those responses and how many you are prepared to see.

The pitch

Sandra

Many agencies think it impresses to pile in a huge 'team'. I disagree; if there are more than five presenting there are usually a couple of ringers. Three or four can usually do the job and they must all have something useful to say.

I think a good presentation can be made in 20 minutes. Powerpoint is useful for emphasis or illustration, not for reading out. However, our best pitches have been where the client interrupts and we have to think on our feet. A discussion usually ensues and the knowledge comes out, not just the practised lines.

Make sure you do get to the end of the pitch though as the

financial bits are usually the last. And make sure all your questions are asked.

Jane

Put together a score card and make sure copies are used by everyone attending for each agency interviewed. Before the meeting with the first agency, brief your colleagues so that roles are clear and everyone understands the purpose of the meeting and the scorecard.

By the end of each meeting you should be able to form a view on:

- Do they really want our business?
- Is this project too small for them/the right size?
- Can they/will they resource it effectively?
- Do we like and can we work with the people we've seen today?
- Will their ideas achieve the results we want?
- Are they offering something really different that will work?
- Can they achieve within budget?

Appointing

Sandra

Get their terms of business and discuss anything you're not sure about. Sort out billing and payment terms and length of contract. Six to 12 months is fair for a retainer as results can take time to show. Sign the contract then take them out for a drink and get the relationship going.

Jane

Be prepared to give specific feedback to those whom you have disappointed. Set a time to brief the successful agency in more detail and get the project rolling.

Sandra

The key now is to realise the project through the in-house project team and the PR agency. Agree best methods of communication; ensure that partners will make time available; ensure that the person liaising with the PR agency is keeping the project team informed.

If you hire an agency to work with you on a single project basis you may then decide to take the next step and appoint the agency on a firm-wide basis. Assuming that you each want to continue to work together, set clear objectives, develop a good briefing document and agree the measures of success both internally and with the agency to ensure that you improve your firm's external reputation.

Sandra Hewett MCIPR runs shmr, a leading media relations consultancy in the professional sector. She offers communications consultancy and training.

Jane Biddell is a senior marketing professional who has worked with both legal and accountancy firms.