

# The CEO's PR Shopping Guide

**P**ity the poor CEO. She thinks her company needs "some PR help." How does she choose who to hire? An agency?

There may be a dozen or more public relations companies in the Yellow Pages ...and Heaven knows how many individual freelancers. **Consumer's Report** doesn't test public relations agencies ...although maybe they should!

So she auditions a few PR practitioners and finds that all of them are articulate, plausible, and make similar claims. Every one of them has outstanding cases to talk about.

Never any failures, though ...apparently all public relations projects achieve their objectives! None of them ever ran over budget, couldn't get the client's story placed, or got fired.

Amazing (or maybe not). How many doctors tell you about their patients who died?

I was a client almost exactly as long as I've been a PR consultant. I've worked for big agencies and small ones. In the spirit of trying to help the poor CEO, here's my frank and unexpurgated **CEO PR Shopping Guide**.

#### **Five situations in which you should hire a very small PR company or freelancer:**

- **Your budget is very small (eg. under \$5,000 for a basic publicity project).** Small agencies and freelancers have very low overheads, often operating from a small home office. Many of them are very competent writers, publicists and special events coordinators and can deliver a decent project for relatively low hourly fees (let's say under \$100 an hour).
- **Your problem is relatively simple and doesn't require a team of people.** A freelancer doesn't have a staff of people who can be called in at a moment's notice.
- **Your problem is purely local.** The only people a small PR company or freelancer can count on, are in your local market. (To carry out an assignment in another market, he/she will have to try and contract with someone in that market. Quality assurance may be questionable.
- **Your situation isn't urgent.** A sole practitioner can't juggle several projects at once; he or she probably has other clients and you may have to wait your turn.
- **You don't need highly specialized skills.** The average small agency or freelancer usually is a generalist. If you need specialized skills or resources, he/she may not have them.

## Five situations in which you should hire a larger (usually international) PR company:

- **You need help in one or more distant markets.** An international agency has representation, contacts and intimate local knowledge in many markets.
- **You need the support of allies.** Let's say you have a government problem, in a western nation. Generally government isn't going to meet your needs unless you can meet theirs – in other words, mobilize your allies and support for your position, so that what you want is politically possible for the people in charge. International agencies have the resources and "reach" to line up allies and mobilize grassroots support for your position.
- **Your problem is complex and intractable.** "All of us are smarter than any one of us": the international agency's ability to tap the ideas, experience and contact network of hundreds or even thousands of top-drawer PR people around the world can put awesome thinking power at your disposal. No matter how arcane or complex your problem, the collective brainpower of the international agency has dealt with it - and solved it - somewhere in the world.
- **You are driven more by value than price.** If the stakes are high – the launch of a make-or-break product, the solution to a major corporate crisis – you need the best people in the business ...and they aren't necessarily local. International agencies charge higher fees because they have to hire and retain top-tier people and pay the higher costs of expensive research and client support.
- **You need a business partner, not a "supplier".** International agencies are interested in building long term relationships with first-class clients. Working at the bottom of the food chain – charging discount rates to companies nobody really likes – has no future.

Follow these checklists and you'll at least be able to draw up a good short list of possible PR providers. Now proceed to interview them and make your choice based on:

- **Chemistry.** A relationship with a PR company will most likely work out if you "click" with the key people you'll be working with. Did you like each other? Did they seem to have a passionate interest in you and your problem? You're going to be trusting them with sensitive information and depending on their competence and determination to help you. Were they objective ... and candid?
- **Thinking.** Did they take the trouble to learn something about your business, your industry, your competitors, or your problems? Did they ask smart questions? Did they make suggestions that were smart and creative, but also practical?

- **Track record, as measured by client testimonials.** PR professionals are usually good talkers and presenters; the question is... can they deliver? Find out who their clients are and what they've accomplished for them. Ask for references and talk to those references honestly. Would they hire the firm again? No firm is perfect; what were their weaknesses?

The best people in public relations are looking for the same thing that you are: a chance to work with business people who are smart, ethical, highly committed and professional. You deserve each other.