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Are your teleworkers really secure?

The Art of Tech PR

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CHICAGO – As the economy recovers, technology companies will once again begin the process of engaging new PR firms and beginning new campaigns. Dave Wolkowitz of MarketSting explores challenges and misperceptions companies often face during the process.



Andy Warhol once said that “being good in business is the most fascinating king of art.”

Business as art. Now that's an interesting thought. If you feel the same way, perhaps you'd also believe choosing the right PR firm for your technology company is the greatest art of them all. It's a difficult decision due to the proliferation of ambiguous, non-quantifiable factors.

Thanks to the complexity of their offerings and the ever-dynamic nature the marketplace, technology companies in particular face many challenges when choosing a public relations firm and starting a new PR program. Thoughtful deliberation of the processes might include – but is certainly not limited to – the following ideas.

Does Size Really Matter?

You've probably heard it before: Every firm has the most valuable experience in your industry, the most valuable relationships with “the media,” the creativity of da Vinci and the strategic vision of Welch. And no matter the size, they're always big enough to offer everything you need while at the same time small enough to really care about your account.

So how do you choose? Avoiding nonsensical judging criteria and focusing instead on the root causes for concern would be a good place to start.

Consider these scenarios:

- A 10-year-old software company does \$40 million in revenue and is well-established in several verticals. Poised for additional growth, they sign with a large PR firm that marches out so many “team members” to meetings it feels like a Soviet army parade. They can issue a status report every five minutes and write 100 press releases per month. Alas, they don't seem to have much luck getting actual coverage from that stack of releases.
- A first-year telco hardware start-up company has just signed a retainer with a 20-person agency located down the street. Thanks to closing their second round of funding, the start-up is the largest client and the center of attention – that is, until the PR firm's next “largest client” shows up. Now the start-up wonders if its steady coverage in the trade press will continue.

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Those scenarios may be exaggeration, but you get the point. Conventional wisdom suggests that large companies need large PR firms to handle all their initiatives and small clients should stick with small agencies to assure sufficient attention.

However, the size criterion is a poor proxy for a PR firm's ability to add value and to be there when you need them. Instead, you should focus on your real concerns. For instance, you might instead inquire about a firm's ability to ramp up, how they will prioritize your work among that of their other clients and other such issues.

Understanding the Team

You should understand the composition of your PR firm team, and that means understanding each team member's specific role. For instance, a media relations specialist should thoroughly understand your offering and how it's positioned in the marketplace. If unable to do so, that person will likely be unable to effectively deal with the media.

Understanding team composition will also help spot inefficiencies. PR people should do PR, not be consumed with data entry and record keeping. If some team members serve primarily administrative purposes, your retainer won't be working as hard as it should. Too many resources dedicated to administrative duties indicates poor focus on stimulating results.

There are several ways to get an idea of each person's worth. Consider the questions they ask. Those who don't ask thoughtful questions of their own clients won't be able to answer the media's tough questions or respond in a persuasive manner to reporters' queries.

It's also a good idea to ask each person about one of their most meaningful PR accomplishments and to get an explanation of the path that took them there. For instance, a PR person might explain not only the details of an article and its significance, but also how reporters and publications were targeted, what went into the pitch to the reporter and how the client was counseled prior to the interview.

A Critical Eye (And Ear)

During a PR firm's pitch for your company's business, you'll likely see a highlight reel of sorts – largest hits, best interviews, etc. You'll be invited to assume the media hits you're seeing are indicative of the type of results your company might see. However, it's important to consider the impressive coverage you're viewing may be the result of a campaign with significant differences from your company's future efforts. Consider the following possible differences:

- **Lifecycle Position:**
Lifecycle position matters, whether it's for a product/service, a company or an industry. For instance, PR teams pitching story ideas about a start-up's new product with applications in a rapidly growing industry might get more results than if they were pitching revisions of an existing product offered within a mature or declining industry.
- **Financial Impact:** Companies with a greater financial impact tend to more easily garner coverage than companies with lesser financial impact. A small, privately owned company might have a technically superior product than does a large, publicly traded company, but the smaller company might still receive less coverage and never obtain that elusive "profile" piece.
- **Internal PR IQ:**
Some companies have accessible leadership and palpable eagerness to help

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power PR programs. Others have leadership that cancel interviews and salespeople who won't ask customers to step up to the plate for testimonials and case studies. Poor internal PR IQ can negate strengths in other areas.

- **Budget Size:**

All other factors being equal, the size of a PR budget can impact results. Larger budgets can allow for more in-depth research, more time pitching the media, etc.

The Man in the Mirror

Before implementing a new PR program and even before hiring a new PR firm, a company needs to think about its ability and willingness to fulfill obligations that come with a PR program. It's about taking stock of the PR IQ. Amazing as it seems, some companies buckle under the pressure of interview requests and disappoint the media.

They might have such bureaucracy that PR firms spend a disproportionate amount of time with the administrative duties of a campaign. Conversely, PR productivity is greater when executives acknowledge the time commitment that comes with an active PR program and streamline PR decision making. If your company recognizes it will face numerous organizational challenges when starting a new PR program, you'll want to look for a firm that is capable of inducing change.

- **Consider this hypothetical scenario:**

IntuFlex Software, a developer of enterprise systems, claims its intuitive administration features helps its product deliver higher ROI than the competitors' products. The claim is based on the assumption that intuitive administration means less time training users. Ideally, IntuFlex will be able to offer its customers as sources to the media and will include those customers in press releases and case studies.

Furthermore, suppose IntuFlex is seeking coverage in health care and financial services trade publications. IntuFlex should be able to provide a client example within each of those vertical markets.

In addition to the PR manager, others will need to be involved for IntuFlex to bring its clients to the PR table. The sales department will need to get on board. For that to happen, the PR team needs support of the sales manager and salespeople need to feel secure in exposing their clients to the PR team. Interdepartmental cooperation is a must.

Taking a look at the "man in the mirror" also means checking for alignment between the type of results you wish of your PR program and how worthy your company is of those results. If your company constantly issues releases about new hires and "strategic alliances" that have no real impact on the marketplace, be prepared to have a stack of releases – and Business Wire bills – much heftier than actual coverage of your company.

On the other hand, your company can choose to move away from insignificant announcement-driven PR and toward opportunities involving thought leadership, case studies and other attractive concepts.

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