



Choosing a PR agency today

As search, blogs, social networks, YouTube, Twitter, mobile and other evolving digital forms have joined television, radio and print as powerful, yet very different communications channels, the nature and scope of managing the relationships between organizations and their various audiences has become much more complicated, risky and potentially rewarding. The brands that will create significant and new opportunities for themselves are those who can successfully manage across the new and evolving communications continuum, positioning correctly, creating the right balance of push and pull, taking advantage of the strengths of print and broadcast media, and engaging authentically in the right mix of online activities and conversations. Brands who don't are at a serious disadvantage.

There are many resources to help you choose the right PR partner for your organization. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) offers several checklists for guiding the agency selection process: <http://tinyurl.com/ou7dxq>. Most of these guides cover all the basic issues to consider: credentials, relevant experience and client list, case studies, senior executive qualification,; fit with team leader, how quickly the agency comes up to speed, chemistry with team, fee structures, etc. These are all important to consider and most are fairly unchanged from 10 years ago.

But things have changed, and more things are important to consider today. In addition to the solid classical PR credentials and capabilities that all top agencies should have, the digital factor is becoming more and more important. In September, 2008, Sapient released results of a survey that asked 200+ Chief Marketing Officers what they wanted from their agencies in the coming year (<http://tinyurl.com/57fykh>); here are the top 10 items on their wish lists:

1. Greater knowledge of the digital space
2. More use of "pull interactions"
3. Leverage virtual communities
4. Agency executives using the technology they are recommending
5. Chief Digital Officers make agencies more appealing
6. Web 2.0 and social media savvy
7. Agencies that understand consumer behavior
8. Demonstrated strategic thinking
9. Branding and creative capabilities
10. Ability to measure success

This is not to say that digital is the most important thing to the exclusion of all other channels. In our experience, it's the ability to mix and manage across the entire continuum that creates significant PR success today. That includes print, broadcast, online, events, blogs, microblogs like Twitter and social networks – with good use of search and video along the way.

Because many things in PR are so different today than they were ten or even five years ago, we suggest you add the following four updated criteria to the key fundamentals on your PR agency search checklist:

1. Recent experience creating demonstrable breakthrough PR impact and positive business results for brands like yours across the full spectrum of today's communications channels
2. Strong consulting skills and traditional media capabilities integrated with high-caliber in-house capabilities in search (SEO and SEM), blogger relations, complete blogging and Twitter services, social media consulting and execution and digital video creative, production and distribution.
3. Active expert use of digital channels on the part of the agency and its own executives
4. Sophisticated use of analytics to monitor print, broadcast and online communications, shape strategy and plans and report in detail on campaign results

Good luck!

