

Maintaining a Healthy Client-Agency Relationship



Although good results can occur from suboptimal client-agency relationships, the most successful programs—those with continuous dialogue, respect and remarkable results—are the ones with healthy client-agency relationships. Having been on both the agency and client sides during my career, I can offer the following insight into what clients and agencies love and hate about each other, and tips that can help PR execs on both sides of the table develop successful partnerships and programs.

CLIENTS LOVE:

▶ **Agencies that have deep expertise and contacts.** Clients want a team that has more experience than they do and who can leverage the contacts, successes and lessons learned from other successful campaigns.

▶ **Fresh, creative ideas that hit the bull's eye in terms of results.** Agencies are able to leverage trends from other industries and suggest new ideas that aren't already pervasive in the client's industry.

▶ **Ultra-responsive account teams that care.** There's nothing worse for a client than not being able to reach their PR team during the business day, or getting a slow response. Clients want to believe they are an agency team's priority, and they should be.

▶ **Fast and flexible execution.** Plans and processes are important and necessary for consistency. But the unpredictable nature of business dictates there will be times when a press release needs to be researched, drafted and filed overnight. Agency teams should be able and willing to turn on a dime to unburden the client.

▶ **The ability to generate meaningful business results (worthy of board reports).** The board is not interested in the number of releases written or pitches made; it wants media coverage. Agencies that are able to generate and document success metrics are viewed as valued business partners.

CLIENTS HATE:

▶ **Surprises.** The biggest surprise is usually budget-related. Keep clients informed of the good and the bad, including: over-servicing hours, missed deadlines, major industry coverage that didn't include the client but did include a competitor and changes in personnel.

▶ **Bait and switch.** Many clients select an agency based on persuasive pitches made by charismatic principals. Sometimes, those principals toss critical work to junior team members. This reduces credibility dramatically. Junior team members have their place, but make sure senior experts lead the work.

▶ **Late and/or over-budget deliverables.** Corporate communications/PR managers have to report to their senior management. Missed deadlines or budget overruns reflect directly on them. This often marks the beginning of the end of a client-agency relationship.

▶ **Me-too ideas.** Agencies are hired for their creativity and experience. If no new, breakout ideas are ever presented, clients will look for a more proactive and strategic-thinking team.

▶ **Mediocre work.** Clients are paying their agency to make them shine. Add excellence to everything you do, whether it's as mundane as preparing your weekly meeting agenda or as critical as making recommen-

dations for a new campaign.

AGENCIES LOVE:

▶ **Good, intelligent input.** While agencies should have a sound understanding of a client's market, good input and access to strategic plans and product road maps go a long way toward developing an effective communications program.

▶ **Appreciation.** The words "thank you" can never be used with too much frequency. Knowing they are appreciated gives the account team the added boost to want to go the extra mile for their clients.

▶ **Honesty.** Don't "sell" your PR agency on the performance of your company or the capability of your products. Their credibility (and yours) with the media is at stake. Be honest, too, with feedback, evaluation of the firm, its results or members of the team.

▶ **Clients who believe in and value marketing/PR.** When the client understands the value of PR, it removes the need to continually defend it and it enables the retainer time to be spent on activities that will yield business results.

▶ **True partnerships.** A true partnership is one in which the agency feels it is a valued member of the team and the client feels his company is more successful because of the agency.

AGENCIES HATE:

▶ **Not knowing the big picture.** Working in a vacuum without knowing long-term company goals, plans and activities can be a deficit to a client's communications strategy. It could result in mixed messages and loss of credibility to the targeted audience, which translates to lost revenue.

▶ Price wars.

Public relations is not a commodity, and low price does not always equate to good value. Better criteria for selecting an agency: ability to deliver on success metrics, experience/expertise in your industry, respected by media, ability to offer breakout ideas versus merely executing, chemistry, work ethic and service levels.

▶ **Clients who are impossible to please.** While clients should expect their agencies to excel on their behalf, it helps if they have realistic expectations of the results they can expect and a timeframe of achieving them. It's not realistic or relevant for every client to have a pencil sketch on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* or a segment on *Oprah*.

▶ **Excessive changes in direction or starts and stops.** Changes in plans are normal, expected and easy to adapt to for most agencies. But excessive changes or redirects not only waste time and money, but impact your credibility with media if outreach has already begun.

▶ **Client unavailability or unresponsiveness.** PR is time sensitive. Not having access to the client can lead to miscommunication or, worse, missed opportunities.

Above all, open, honest and mutually respectful communication is the key to maintaining a healthy and happy client-agency experience. **PRN**

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