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Media is job one for PR

Clients want results not slick sales pitches and conference calls

I GOT MY first PR break when NBC's "Today Show" called and asked me if I would come on and explain computer viruses, and why their viewers should care. That five-minute guest spot with Jane Pauley back in the '80s propelled my company's security product from "also ran" to "Product of the Year." Ever since then, I've looked for ways to integrate media into my business plans.

PR has been a consistent and critical component of the success of my business operations over the last 25 years. From my time with huge global corporations such as IBM and KPMG to my time with small businesses like TradeWave and Bridge-V6, PR has often made the difference between success and failure.

I've worked in 30 countries around the world. Typically, I've been hired to start a division from scratch. I assisted in the start-up of the e-commerce division at IBM, a security division at a defense contractor and a managed-services organization at KPMG. Most recently, I was hired to turn around the struggling European operation of a "big four" professional-services firm.

It was in 2004, after I decided to take a year off to write a book on managing business risks around the world, that I realized how important PR has always been to me.

But, over time, I've also watched the nature of the PR agency change considerably. Many, particularly the larger ones, have shifted away from their core-and invaluable-service of getting press attention. Some have also acquired the big-ad-agency habit of billing for things I don't need and giving me inexperienced staffers instead of top executives.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

With companies faced with the mandate of increased productivity and return on investment, it's striking that some in the PR industry have yet to adapt to clients' demands.

PR executives' relationships with the client team, understanding of the business and great media relationships are the keys to success. While I like statistics and complex measurement for justification, PR must simply deliver results, and that means securing relevant media placements. That's how I grade a public-relations firm, not how well it reports back the work being done.

My finance departments scrutinized each bill in an effort to measure ROI. But the billing practices at many agencies seem to be in conflict with the purpose of addressing the business needs of the company.

Growth has hurt PR firms. Many of the larger shops have broadened their range of offerings, branching into things like brand management, crisis communications and investor relations, and left media relations as almost a fringe activity. In this economy, that makes them less relevant to me.

Growth has also increased overhead, with clients paying not only for teak conference tables, but for distant partners and burgeoning administrative costs.

These things were more acceptable in the boom times, but their need to keep all these people billing at high rates has led to issues in these tough economic times. Earlier this year, my home city of Los Angeles reportedly experienced its PR firm routinely billing 15 minutes for a voicemail, 30 minutes for an e-mail, and \$1,200 for partner lunches.

Lately I've leaned toward a new breed of PR professionals. They've learned hard lessons over the past few years and now stick to the principles of efficiency and dedicated work.

The founder of one such firm, Allison & Partners, took a personal interest in my Deloitte & Touche European business, making us feel we were its only account. I approached this firm with a modest trial budget-a tactic I recommend-and asked them to generate media results for us in Europe in only one month.

REAL RESULTS

It was a large task, as we had no name recognition in the security-consulting arena in Europe and no relationships with the press in this region. None of our partners had been trained to speak to the media about the business. The firm media-trained a dozen of my people, developed key messages the entire organization followed and coached us through a series of top-tier interviews with outlets such as CNBC and The New York Times. I found that not only was the firm well-known by these media outlets, but it was liked.

In six months, we generated over 300 million positive impressions in our target markets, becoming regulars on CNBC Europe and in The Financial Times. This is the kind of PR I want. Senior management that is too busy winning new business to worry about maintaining clients may have worked for my father's company. Not for mine.

I am a fan of PR and have seen the impact it can have on a brand. I value senior strategic counsel. More so than advertising, the constant string of speaking engagements, media interviews and byline-article opportunities are the keys to moving the needle in my line of work. The smart PR agency, large or small, will see that and focus on delivering great media relations, and measuring and billing accordingly.

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By Tom Patterson

Tom Patterson is the author of the forthcoming book " Mapping Security," from Symantec-Press with Addison Wesley.

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