

Solve Anything with Dr. Mark

Career Advice
for the
Working Class

Good PR is supposed to make you more money than it costs

Q: I know that if a tree falls in the desert and nobody hears it, whether it makes or doesn't make a sound, nobody cares. That's how I feel about PR. I've used PR in the past to help our company that helps businesses go "green," but it's always cost me more money than it's made me. So I've stopped it especially given the tough economy and poor results from the past. I now think people might be coming to the desert, so I'm about to think of re-engaging a PR company so they "hear me." But I'd like them to do more than hear. Any suggestions on how to avoid the PR "black hole?"



A: Public relations can drive business forward by helping meet marketing and sales objectives, but many companies waste time on gimmicky campaigns or poorly executed initiatives that do little but spend precious budgets. PR has always been a cost, but companies should consider putting PR on the revenue line and tracking ROI. Los Angeles-based Olmstead Williams Communications provides Business-to-business public relations, strategic planning, crisis communications, social media, civic engagements and media relations for technology and professional service.

Trace Williams, CEO and President "had me at hello" when we met and she said, "We're not about making people famous for its own sake. We're about making our clients so much money, that our fees are insignificant compared to the results they achieve through using us."

She explains, "We get hired because a company is paying big monthly PR bills to a big agency with no results." Williams explains some of the biggest pitfalls in PR and how to avoid them:

Stop the press releases! Too many news releases and no one to care ... personalized pitches tailored for specific reporters are the key to most media coverage — not news releases. No top-tier media outlet is going to run your news release anyway. They have to write their own story, which is why they call them reporters. Let them do their job. Tell them why they should care in the context of the larger world. They might read it, at best, after reading the pitch. The back and forth arguments over a CEO's quote is a budget waste. Instead, budget,

i.e. time, should be used on outreach and follow up. It's better to have pr make another round of calls and emails. News releases have their place (major financial announcements, new products, a new CEO, for example), but don't over-think or over-commit to them.

Social media with no regular media.

The enigma of the gate keeper-free world made some businesses believe that all you need is to blog and tweet — monthly budgets will run between \$4,000 to \$40,000. This is a waste in the absence of a corresponding PR/media campaign aimed at print and other media. Third party validation is crucial to building presence on the web, in search engines and among your prospects. Social media is part of an overall public relations campaign and any PR firm you talk to should have this expertise in 2011.

Over-complicated crisis communications plans.

It's important to be prepared before a crisis happens, but it's easy to spend thousands of dollars and more in human resources on a crisis plan that has so many steps and levels that it's simply not actionable in any meaningful way during a real emergency. Keep it simple with a flow chart that outlines the spokesperson (who shouldn't always be the CEO) phone numbers and email addresses that really matter when time is most critical.

Staying the course. The relationship between a PR firm and a client is a partnership that requires evaluation, regrouping and re-launching to ensure results. Objectives change and miscommunication seeps into projects. The firm should know right away when an initiative is faltering — fail small and fail fast — or throw good money after bad. Veering off track or not making course corrections can waste a budget. If you're not hitting the targets, you can't hit your ROI. PR firms should pepper clients with questions, and this requires a text/cell phone/speed dial/email relationship.

Clarity. It's shocking how many businesses aren't clear about their basic market. Who are the customers? Market perception? Differentiation? What are the present barriers to greater success? PR needs answers to these and other questions. Then PR must poke hole in the responses and comes back with a program that's on target, makes financial sense and most importantly, one that can be executed.

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