

FREE



GUIDE 2019

**Process for
choosing a PR
agency**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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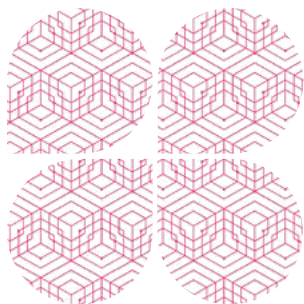
Introduction

Appointing an external PR agency to look after your communications needs is a big step, whatever the size of your organisation. Not only can you use their expertise to convey a positive message both internally and externally, of your business activities, company successes and key people; but they can support the in-house marketing and communications team in creating effective communications campaigns and strategies.

In the same way that appointing a service provider within the built environment requires time and effort, finding the right agency can be a challenge. However cut corners and you might end up with the wrong choice, which in the long run could be detrimental to your business.

Below we outline the key points to keep in mind when choosing a communications agency.





This short guide takes you through the process.

Below we outline the top tips for choosing a PR agency.

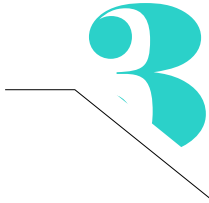
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Begin by thinking about the kind of agency that you need. It may be one which has particular expertise in financial or corporate PR; a communications facilitator which will help generate editorial content and ensure you target the right media in your sector; or perhaps an agency which offers a diverse portfolio of services, from direct marketing to focus groups. At this stage you'll also need to consider the size of agency you'd prefer, from a boutique sized more personalised firm to a large international agency. Where should they be based? As a client you can ensure they always come to you, but this will cost you money, so you're unlikely to choose an agency in London if your office is in Newcastle.

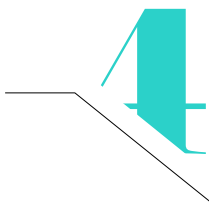
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The cost. Determine the budget size and work out how much time that will buy you. One department within your business might have a certain budget for PR but there might be other departments within the organisation that can contribute to that budget should it be needed. At pitch point – the agencies should give you an idea of day rates, and that will fluctuate across different sized firms. Costs are usually broken down by day rate, which vary depending on what you want from the agency. For instance are you buying public affairs, specialist financial PR or more straightforward business win announcements? When it comes to the cost, remember there's no point in having an enormous amount of money to spare and not the right type of content that can be used externally on media relations. Be realistic on what works and what doesn't, as throwing money at it doesn't necessarily mean you're going to get the best PR in the world.





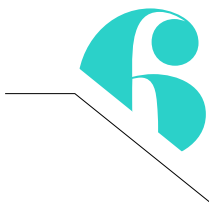
Check the market. PR Week compiles an annual list of the top PR consultancies, which will give you an idea of specialisms, turnover and size of agencies. The PCRA (Public Relations Consultants Association) website can also help you narrow down your choice, as it offers advice on how to choose agencies, and if you'd prefer to cut down on the legwork, offers a business matching service, based on region, budget and size of agency. This service will match your requirements to the capabilities of agencies that have been accredited with the industry quality kitemark; a Communications Management Standard (CMS) that is the ISO9001 and Investors in People equivalent for the global PR industry.



Consult those in the know. Call journalists in your sector who write for the key media and ask them who is doing a good job, always offers them great content and is readily accessible. You'd be surprised at the number of agencies which supposedly represent a client but are negligent about lining clients up when a busy journalist is looking for comment. For the client this is an opportunity lost. You may also want to contact people in your sector that (as long as they are not direct competitors) should be able to give you some feedback on agencies they'd trust and those who they'd never want to appoint again.



Put together a long-list of 6 or 7 agencies after checking out their client list to see there is no conflict of interest and contact each of them with an outline tender brief. This should outline your company, where it is today, the challenges for the organisation and the industry at large and what you're looking for from an agency, for example, retained or to work for you on a series of projects. Set up an initial meeting, which shouldn't take up too much time, but serve as meet and greet session to check credentials, i.e. they've got the right services and contacts within your sector and that they're solvent.

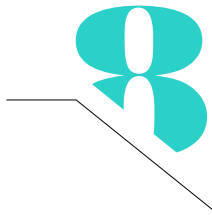


Put together a short-list. Whittle your list down to three or four agencies and invite them back in to do a full pitch. They should be briefed prior for this with a specific creative task; from being asked to develop ideas around a new or live campaign; an additional marketing campaign; or even how they would approach a fresh PR campaign. This process will help you measure their level of experience, the calibre of their team and how they handle difficult situations.

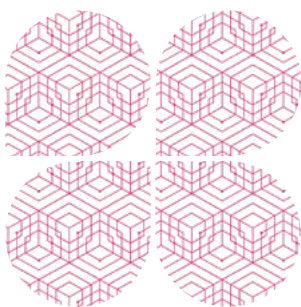


Ask them to present their ideas. This should be to key internal stakeholders in the business, with ideally a mix of sales, marketing, in-house communications people and a representative from the senior management team. After all, if you're making a big investment in an agency, you want a good sense from across the business that it will be the right fit. Aim to hold the pitches on the same day or over a couple of days if you can, as that way it's easier to measure the results. At this stage, do insist on meeting the account team, as you don't want to only meet the top people within the PR agency, but everyone who would be involved in that account.





Make your choice. It may help to compile a score card by grading them on creativity, culture fit, results, size and fit with the sector. Check that the agency can clearly define where your pounds go and how prescriptive you can be about measuring the results. Once you've decided on the best fit, chase up customer references from existing clients that should have been supplied as part of the pitch and you're ready to appoint your new communications agency.



Conclusion

Once you've chosen an agency you might want to dip your toe in the water by beginning with a specific project to see if there is a good culture fit; however experts agree that a retained relationship is more productive in terms of results.

This is because a retained agreement is considered much better in terms of developing long term relationships, building up relationships with media, getting under the skin of the organisation and working in partnership.

Once you've appointed an agency, the idea of going through the whole process all over again may not appeal but industry best practice that you review your agency every 18 months to two years. However, if you're really happy with their performance you might want to push this to three years.

Even if you love your agency though, there is no harm in bringing them in to ask them to re-pitch, even if you haven't gone out to tender. This will help keep things fresh, and ensure you don't need any account changes, different ideas, or different internal or agency people. The main considerations to remember when choosing a PR agency are their levels of creativity and the culture fit. Once appointed, the agency becomes a part of what you do, and you may be working with them every day. This means you need to develop a good, frank relationship, and you need to be confident that they can get the job done; come up with new ideas and keep things fresh.

References:

Public Relations Consultants Association www.prca.org.uk/

PR Week www.prweek.com/uk





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