

The Quick Guide to Briefing and Choosing an Agency Or How to Find a Gem Among all Those Rocks

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The Brief is Important

Briefing an agency is one of the most important parts of developing a public relations, investor relations or marketing communications program. And it's a critical component of getting good communications ideas and strategies so you can choose which agency to work with.

If you don't get this part of the process right, everything that follows will suffer.

Yet most companies give little, if any, thought to the importance of the process. In an attempt to help a little in this area (and, we admit, to make our job incredibly easier, too) we offer these suggestions.

Before You Start

Before you even think about briefing an agency, you need to determine your objectives – your overall objectives and those for the particular project. Objectives work best if they are committed to writing and are SMART:

Specific

Measurable

Achievable

Realistic

Time bound

If you don't do this, you risk not getting what you want from the public relations investor relations and marketing communications agency and pre-empting possible great ideas that could make or break your communications program.

Let's Build a Relationship

The next important step is to consider the type of relationship which will work best for you. There is a range of possibilities. At one end is a simple one-time project; at the other a longer-term relationship in which the agency comes to know you, your company, your people, your business and your industry intimately and works closely with you through the years.

If all you want is the lowest price for a straightforward project, then a one-off might be best for you. If you are looking for something involving more strategic thinking, an understanding of your business situation, and real creative insights and inputs to your communications problems, then you will want a closer, longer .

Most agencies, (and that includes us) will tell you that the clients who get the best work and the greatest contribution for the money they spend are the ones who work closest with the agency in a long-term relationship.

It's Showtime, or How to Shortlist

Assuming you do not already have an agency on board, you first need to make a preliminary judgement of the type of communications you require.

Do you need public relations alone, or do you require investor relations and marketing communications as well? The answer is important, because many agencies (but not us, we're happy to boast) specialize in only one area. Specialization is fine as far as it goes, but most communications programs and campaigns benefit from the overlapping of the communications disciplines.

The world, unfortunately, doesn't fit into neat little communications silos. Invariably, the communications that will overcome your company's investor relations challenges will involve some public relations and marketing communications.

Think of it as a holistic approach to solving the communications challenges companies face today. Public relations works with investor relations and marketing communications to provide a communications whole that is greater than the sum of the individual parts.

The benefit of a multi-disciplined agency lies in our ability to integrate all aspects of a strategic program to derive the greatest results from the effort involved. It can also result in lower costs for you, since you do not have to educate two or more separate firms on your business, your industry and your communications challenges.

So do this part of the exercise first. Then draw up a shortlist of qualified agencies. Finding them is simple. Ask around your business network, check directories, or simply ask us (no charge, all part of the service).

When you have decided who should be on your shortlist, make sure you do a thorough job of briefing them.

It's not a good idea to brief more than three agencies. While agencies don't charge for the pitch, it does cost them money - and ultimately these costs find their way into the fees charged clients. Agencies will pull out all the stops to do their best work if they are only competing with one or two others. If there are five or six agencies on the list they may be less highly motivated, and a lot of people's time - including yours - will be wasted.

We'll be Brief about the Brief

Here it is, short and simple.

Cover these key elements:

- Necessary background Information
- Your objectives
- Your budget
- The timing

If we're going to help you solve your communications problems and challenges, we need to know a lot about your company, its position in its industry, its reputation, its goals, and the communications challenges you face, the long-term communications objectives, and the environment in which the communications will have to perform. This background information should contain a summary of all relevant market, reputation, positioning and image information that will help the agency understand the current situation or challenge. For example, we'd like to know a good bit of detail on your company's:

- Products/services
- Brands - Category; History, and Positioning
- Target Market
- Target Audiences
- Competitors, industry trends
- Other market influences, such as seasonality, advertising, pricing, government legislation or regulations
- Any previous research you have
- Your current stock price
- The stock's performance over the past 12 months
- Analysts' recommendations on your company's stock
- Analysts' issues with your company and its performance or reporting

- How you'll determine success in this project

The objectives should include:

Clearly formulated objectives for the communications program.

How these relate to current marketing objectives and strategies and overall business objectives and strategies.

A time frame for accomplishing the goals of the communications program

How much you have to spend in achieving your communications goals.

While many companies are reluctant to discuss budgets up front, we believe you should. There are important reasons for letting an agency know the budget, and whether it is fixed or flexible.

Here's why: It costs a lot more to do an absolutely perfect job than to do a useful job. Covering every communications contingency simply takes more time and costs more. Knowing the approximate size of the budget, and whether there may be some flexibility, allows us to design a program that is realistic but will do the job, and perhaps present alternatives. It also saves everyone's time and effort, keeping the agency from proposing a program that is out of reach for the amount of money the client has available.

It's always helpful for an agency to know a company's preferred timing for the communications project. The key is how the project fits in with your own company timelines, and in particular, if there are any critical deadlines. For example, if the results are required to meet a deadline for reporting to your Board, or for the public relations component of a new product launch, a day's delay may be critical. With other projects certain timing may be desirable, but not essential.

Into Every Life Comes . . . a Decision

Which agency will you choose? The decision obviously will be influenced by your assessment of who demonstrates the best understanding of the issues, the greatest sensitivity to your company and its culture, and the best communications solution. But there is more to it than this.

Factor in experience, the perceived abilities of the individuals who will be working on the communications challenges with your company, their understanding of your industry and its key drivers.

A recent ad campaign sates the issue well: Look for experience. You don't want communications people who are learning on your project; you want communications people who have been there and done that and who bring insights and strategic thinking to the communications challenges you face.

And be sure of what you're getting. Almost always, communications firms send their best and brightest to the pitch. That's nice, but your concern should be that these are, indeed, the people who you will end up dealing with if you hire that agency. Not to brag, but at MacInnes Communications Group the people you meet in the pitch are the people who will be working with you on your communications project.

Ask yourself (after you've asked your prospective agency) what they bring to the table that you couldn't get from that guy in accounting who likes to write and would love to become a communicator.

A little aside at this point. Every spring in neighborhoods across the country, you can see homeowners tackling the landscaping outside their homes. A lot of people try this. After all, it looks easy, doesn't it? And, sure, there are successes, people who do plant their own trees and flowers and watch them grow fabulously.

But most of them are from the plant-the-flowers-and-watch-them-die school of gardening.

Strong, effective communications are a lot like gardening. On the surface, communications looks so simple anyone should be able to do it. But like most amateur gardeners, many who try see their investment shrivel up and turn brown. They spend their money but they don't achieve their communications goals.

Let us suggest that in choosing the proper agency, you are getting a group of people who do nothing else but communicate for a living; people who know how to reach the people you need to reach; people who know how to carefully craft communications in highly specific ways to achieve highly specific results; people who know the media players and influencers you need to reach; people with an outside view of your company uncolored by years of working inside.

Like the stunt drivers on TV always say: Don't try this at home. Simply put, your communications are too important to the success of your company to be left in the hands of amateurs.

What this all boils down to is simply this:

Meeting the critical communications challenges your company faces is a job for professional communicators. And in choosing the agency you are going to work with, one rule applies above all others:

Choose carefully and choose wisely.

Oh, and one last thing. Our phone number is (905) 479-6333. It's worth the call.

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