Leadership Tips for a Successful Public Relations Professional

What is good PR?

1. Good PR is telling the client what they need to hear instead of what they want to hear.
2. Good PR recognizes that the best "PR strategy" needs to be followed-up with the client's good products/services or else it's all a vain and wasted effort that harms everyone's reputation.
3. Good PR is not just about the over-glorified launch. Good PR helps build and sustain a groundswell of brand support — incrementally changing consumer/end user behaviors via a steady stream of relevant and candid communication to both "media" and "consumers."
4. Good PR celebrates the client's customers in an inclusive, non-exploitive way.
5. Good PR welcomes the input of "neutrals" and especially "critics," and adapts strategy accordingly.
6. Good PR is resourceful — if you can't reach a journalist or blogger over the phone or by email, search for them on Twitter and send them a message. Find creative ways to pitch beyond the standard press release.
7. Good PR is proactive in idea generation and responsive in a crisis. Good PR finds the balance.
8. Good PR is measurable. (And yet also hard to measure, since most clients want to measure different things.)
9. Good PR leverages pre-existing relationships with influential people — relationships built on trust and credibility earned over years of service.
10. Good PR almost always "gets ink" because an interesting story has been well-told to the right people.

The Account Manager of the future will:

1. Have a business mindset
2. Be a superb diagnostician
3. Be a marketing expert
4. Think like the client's customers
5. Be a skillful salesperson (as PR professionals, we are always selling something/someone — client, brand, etc.)
6. A strong grasp on non-traditional media
7. Act like a producer

Think like the Client

To be successful, we have to think like the client — what do they expect?

Listen for what isn't there

What the client says: *Can you talk more about our product in this section of the contributed article?*
What the client means: *We are not sure if this is going to reflect our messaging properly. What do you think?*

Everyone fears the dreaded "Change this contributed article text" line, and everyone (well, almost everyone) has probably cringed and then painfully capitulated. When faced with clients asking for rewrites to press releases or contributed articles, especially from those clients who don't have any public relations training, it's important to **check your ego at the door** and ask a few pointed questions. What you really need to find out is what the client actually means. Before doing anything to the design, pause for a moment and ask the client to explain what it is about the design that doesn't accomplish the specific goals you outlined in the pre-work discovery meetings. (You did set specific goals, didn't you!?)

Here are a few tips to help you get to the point:

- Ask blunt questions (but tactfully). Don't start or get hauled into arguments.
- Use feature/benefit terminology and plain language, not PR-speak.
- Use yes/no questions that push the client to reveal what they really think (e.g. "Do you think this meets our messaging?").
- Take criticism well. (No one likes an overly sensitive person.)

By your focusing on the goals rather than the implementation, clients will understand that you are trying to use your craft for their benefit, not just to take their money. Oh, and a note about that ego you left at the door: now is not the time to go into a diatribe about your profession or your skill as a public relations professional. No one cares; your client just wants an article or press release that they can be proud of when they show it to their boss.

Admit it when you screw up

Then do everything possible to make it right. Mistakes are okay; everyone makes them from time to time. Hopefully you're not a habitual offender. But the general rule is: the sooner you recognize the mistake and take the heat; the better off you'll be in the long run.

By letting more time pass, the mistake only grows and becomes more difficult to a roaring inferno. Talk with your manager for the best approach to take when working with your client and clear the air and get on with it. Your client will appreciate your candor and honesty, even if he or she isn't that happy about the problem itself.

Here are the top 9 things that clients say are important for their agency to have:

1. Industry insight and knowledge
2. Knowledge of client's business and competition
3. Be accountable for agency's actions (if you say you are going to do something — do it!)
4. A passion for finding the solution
5. Advice on selecting strategy and tactics
6. Consistency without surprises — predictability
7. The ability to make a decision without having to check with someone else

8. Primary interest focused on the client needs, not just the agency bottom line
9. Cost effectiveness for all services the agency provides

Here are some tips that have helped set client expectations accordingly in the past:

- **What outlets are important to your client? –** it's important that you understand your clients expectations before you start working with them. Do they expect to be featured in *BusinessWeek* or invited to be a guest on Oprah? Do they have a story that is strong enough for either of those outlets? If not, tell them upfront. Help them understand what makes a good story for these outlets.

- **The Best Outlets for Your Goals –** develop a PR strategy for your client that clearly outlines the best outlets to reach their target audiences to generate the best results for the campaign. Help them understand the reasoning behind the outlets you've selected, and why it doesn't make sense to pursue opportunities in outlets that will have no interest in covering them. A product review in a vertical trade can often deliver more sales than a brief mention in a business magazine – clients may not understand this like you do, so you have to educate them.

- **There is Only So Much Real Estate to Work With –** while online opportunities increase the number of options for placing stories, there is still incredible competition in all areas to be featured in a story. At a typical trade publication, only three out of 15 or more interview sources may make it into the final article. Regardless of how effective you are at lining up interviews for your client, there is a small chance that the information you provide will be relevant or useful for the story the journalist is working on. Clients need to understand that it's a long-term process of building relationships with the media, one that will eventually pay off if you stick with it and prove yourself as an expert source.

- **Timing is Tricky –** your client may need to secure publicity opportunities in the next 60 days. Your chances of securing coverage may be best in 120 days, around a major conference or special issue. Helping clients understand timing issues is important for setting expectations. You need to constantly be working to develop relationships with media, so you'll be able to capitalize on opportunities when the timing is right. Just like all clients are not in the market to buy your product or service at one time, so to are the media not always working on stories that are the best fit for your clients. Your PR efforts need to be ongoing and not a one-time campaign.

- **Defining Return on PR Investment –** how you define PR return on investment (PRROI), and how your client defines successful outcomes, may be very different. It's essential that you collaborate with your clients to both define what success looks like, and to gauge how realistic the outcome will be. Clients often expect to generate much more coverage than is realistic for their investment. If clients understand average coverage generated per pitch or campaign, looking at your historical performance with other similar clients, they will be much more receptive to receiving invoices for the work you are doing. And your client satisfaction will be higher. Don't wait until the end of the month, when the client is arguing about an invoice, to educate them on how the PR process works.

- **PR is More Than Publicity –** clients often hire a PR agency to generate press clips for them. This is the wrong approach for clients, and the wrong scenario to begin working with a client. Publicity is only one area where PR delivers value, and probably one of the least valuable areas based on my experience. It's up to you to educate and prove your value in other areas to clients. How does your agency help clients adapt to new media, such as social media? How do you help clients deliver consistent and compelling messaging across a diverse set of target audiences? How does your PR strategy integrate with and boost the value of other marketing programs? The more you can make your client an expert on the potential of PR, the more they will view you as a strategic counselor, and not just the people that get them press.

These are just a few suggestions for setting and managing client expectations in PR.

Overall, with clients, follow the path of least resistance — make the client's job look easy because it will help you reach your objectives. Don't become the client's gopher because if you do, your value diminishes. It's essential to MANAGE EXPECTATIONS. Demonstrate that you have their needs in mind — they need to FEEL THE LOVE, and that you are working for them.

The primary responsibility of Trainer Communications is to make our clients successful, not just happy.