

Professional Marketing

TEN TOUGH QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT YOUR PUBLIC RELATIONS

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As the boom run in most economies slows down (and starts going backwards), firms are facing increasing financial pressure. All aspects of the business are examined and, naturally enough, marketing investment costs come under great scrutiny. This article looks at how firms can maximise their investment in their public relations, predominantly in the area of media relations through asking ten tough questions.

1 Is there a link between your PR and your strategic business goals?

Staff and clients like to be associated with successful law firms. No one wants to work for or hire a firm that they perceive as being weak, vulnerable or in decline. They want to read broadly positive, or at least balanced, things about their firm. They want to see that it is doing well. They want to feel that it is highly regarded in its markets and is an attractive place to work or even seek a merger with.

If you are looking to recruit into certain areas or you have taken a decision to merge your business with another, then you can use your PR to create a climate of opinion and editorial coverage to support that. Treat your PR as an aid to recruitment or as a way of building background acceptance for merger talks and negotiations rather than an adjunct and it will help build your case and develop your attractiveness to other parties.

Gaining coverage for the positive aspects of your firm does not happen by magic. It happens through taking a pro-active approach towards getting your message out. Too often bad or negative news dominates – poaching by other law firms, client defections and questions over the long-term survival of particular firms.

2 Is there a link between your PR and your marketing?

Do the areas of comment that you have in the media and articles that you are placing have any real relationship or link to the areas that you are trying to promote through your marketing? In a number of firms there is a divergence between the two, with the media coverage reflecting areas where there are the most voluble fee-earners or where there is a hot issue. This approach is fine for getting the coverage but can actually undermine your market position – if you want to be known for your M&A capabilities then talking at length in the media about intellectual property or real estate law distracts from the message you are trying to promote.

3 Is PR involved in the planning of your marketing?

Nothing is worse for either in-house or external PR professionals than to be brought in either when the marketers have developed and 'sold-in' their plans (and budgets) to their internal clients. Bring them in early since the input can pay dividends throughout the process.

4 Is your media coverage appearing in the places you WANT to get coverage or just in the places where you can GET coverage?

There is a massive difference between want and get. The coverage you want has to be worked at and earned. It is far too easy to rely on traditional stalwarts such as certain aspects of your own trade press or local media. If you really want to be in the broadcast media, the national press or the trade press of your clients then you need to plan it, work at it and invest the time and resources in making it happen. Opportunities to contribute to the publications you want to be seen in may be few and far between; you need to be pro-active in approach, whilst not being annoying to reporters.

5 Do you make the most of your coverage?

Once your articles have appeared, are the fee earners involved encouraged to use that to their advantage? Do you get reprints of important pieces? Are they included in reception areas, sent to existing or prospective clients and business referrers, put up on your web site, circulated to staff? Do you see if a piece on the same topic can be placed elsewhere, maximising the return on the original article? Good coverage can be used to create additional coverage – the fact that you are gaining good exposure on an issue can itself be seen as a news story by the trade media, which in turn can reinforce the perception of you being the market leader in an area.

6 Is your PR pro-active or is it all hand-to-mouth re-active coverage?

Whether you look at the in-house PR team or an external agency, the issue is the same. Are they kept suitably informed in order to be pro-active? PR people that understand your industry and the issues you face can be pro-active without being fed information but there are dangers of them going off on a tangent. Like a hungry tiger, an agency needs to be kept fed. It needs to be continually briefed on developments in the firm and what the firm is trying to achieve. Only then can it really be purposeful in what it does for you in creating editorial opportunities and coverage.

7 Do you really have the right people handling your PR?

Enthusiasm, experience and expertise are what you require from your PR people. They need to be able to advise sensibly on what is realistic and achievable. They also need to be able to give your partners the confidence that they are the right people for the job and actually deliver results for you. This is not always the case. The temptation is to resource in-house at too low a level or to demand much for little money. Neither really gets you much benefit.

With agencies, the common cause of complaint is that the people who really impressed your partners at the pitch and then the first few meetings are almost never the people you get working on the account on a day to day basis. Firms should demand that they get the expertise that they believe that they are paying for. If there are changes to the team then they should be discussed and planned through, not just imposed. You also need to like and trust the people at the agency. They have got to understand your language and have real experience of the issues that you are facing. If you are not satisfied then put the work out to pitch.

8 Is it effective?

Trying to evaluate the effectiveness of your PR is notoriously difficult since some of its most valuable work can be invisible in terms of delivery. Mitigating or preventing damage can be more valuable than actual coverage on positive issues. There are a number of measurement tools out there that can give you a quantitative assessment of your coverage versus those of your competitors but what really counts is whether it helps change attitudes and for that you have to include PR-related questions in your ongoing programme of market research and client attitude surveys. You do have those don't you? If not, why not?

9 Are you getting value for money?

An economic downturn means that all aspects of the business come under scrutiny and your PR must be cost-effective and deliver value for money. This is an area where appearance counts for as much as reality. When working in-house I've tended to fire large agencies and hire smaller ones. They tend to be more cost effective, are more than capable of getting the results you need, and as a client you are a good name for them to have. Also, if you've not put your work out for pitch in the last 9-12 months then now is the time to do so, it will keep your existing agency on its toes and you can have a sensible discussion about fees.

10 Do you keep it all under review or does it drift along by itself?

Your PR efforts need to be kept under review. At least quarterly. Of course, if you have got your PR closely locked in with your marketing and the overall business strategic goals then the discussions should be short and painless. This is especially so if it is also tracked in your market research. The alternative is that it drifts along by itself in a parallel – sometimes diverging – 'universe' of its own. Now that can't be right, can it?

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