

# HOW TO MAKE YOUR PUBLIC RELATIONS AGENCY FEEL USED

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A public relations expert describes how a client can most effectively use a public relations agency.

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BY ROLF GLERUM

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**A** common subject one sees in trade press articles these days is "How to select a public relations (or advertising) agency." Rarely, if ever, does an article deal with an equally important subject, and that is "How to properly use a public relations agency."

Public relations firms have etched out their own niche in the marketing communications world and shouldn't be confused with, or mistaken for, advertising agencies, lobbyists, research companies or management consultants. Some PR firms in larger markets claim to provide these services, but realistically, especially in smaller markets such as Portland and Seattle, these services are normally handled by specialists in the specific fields.

*Rolf Glerum is vice president and general manager of the Portland office of Rocky Marsh Public Relations. He has been in the advertising/public relations business for more than 25 years.*



DAN POUISH

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**ROLF GLERUM:** If you hire a PR agency and don't know how to use it properly, you're just throwing your money away.

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**OREGON  
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So — you've hired a new PR agency. You've recognized that you have a problem, or that you want to prevent a problem, or that you want to project a certain image, or any number of other specific or general assignments which such firms are hired to do. Now what?

You, as a client, have certain obligations to your agency, just as your agency has other obligations to you. Unless both parties fulfill these obligations, the relationship can't function properly, and the inevitable result will be wasted time and money, frustration, delay and, most importantly, unsatisfactory performance.

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### Client Obligations

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1. Set your own objectives. Call on your agency to assist you in this task, but don't expect it to do it on its own.
2. Set your own budget. This doesn't have to be figured to the dollar, but don't go to your agency and say "You're the experts. You tell me how much I should spend." That's unrealistic, and it's a cop-out.
3. Expect to pay for your agency's planning and think time. Most firms charge by the hour and don't work on speculation. If you ask your agency to write a public relations plan or program, you should expect to pay for it, even if you don't accept it.
4. Make yourself available for important decisions or events. Don't expect your agency to be your spokesperson to the press. Don't leave town without appointing a designate when you know an important approval is coming up. Don't expect your agency account executive to get approvals from several different persons — that kind of leg work is best done by you or someone working for you.
5. Don't even *think* of asking for guaranteed performance. Public relations persons who adhere to the Public Relations Society of America's Code of Professional Standards are prohibited from offering guarantees. But beyond that, it's just poor business. By the same token, don't expect your PR firm to bat a thousand every time. We all strike out now and then. Alas, it's an imperfect world.
6. Pay your bill promptly and fully. Don't expect your agency to be your banker. This is especially critical on direct vendor charges, such as printing, photography, catering and the like.

7. Consider your agency a department of your company. Bring it in on important decisions — the higher the level, the better. Don't expect it to win the game if it can't see all the cards. The agency might do it, but it will take more time and cost you more money.
8. Don't expect big results from little budgets. Just as in any business, you get what you pay for. Occasionally, a windfall situation will occur as a result of little or no expenditure, but the other side of that coin is when you spend a lot of money and the results are dismal. Don't count on miracles.

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### Agency Obligations

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1. Clients' interests come first. If the agency can't work within the client's system, change the agency (or the account person), not the system. If an important client event is coming up, the account executive shouldn't schedule an out-of-town trip or a vacation two days before.
2. Avoid conflicting accounts. If there is a possibility of an account conflict, the agency is obligated to disclose that fact to both of the clients in question, and abide by their decision.
3. Keep accurate and timely records. Agency books should be open for clients' inspection at any time. Monthly statements should reflect a reasonably detailed description of what was accomplished during the previous month, how much time it took, and who did the work.
4. Just as the client must keep itself available, so must the agency. This is especially critical in emergencies or crisis situations, when there is a lot to be done and no one to do it. The client's first call for help should be to the agency, and someone should be there to answer the phone.
5. The agency's principal service is that of creative problem-solving. It should constantly seek ways to "go the extra mile," and to give its client more than is asked for and more than is expected.
6. Ideas, ideas, ideas. These are really all a PR agency has to sell, along with the skill and talent to carry them out. Clients have ideas, too, of course, but if they all keep coming from the client side, an agency review is in order.

7. Judicious cost control and efficient time management are two of the most important agency obligations. Any service business which spends other people's money must be careful not to exceed budget limitations and to keep the client fully apprised of all unusual occurrences which might knock the budget or the schedule askew. Clients don't like surprises, and PR agencies shouldn't provide them.

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### An Honest Self-Appraisal

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Now that you've hired a PR firm, sit back and reflect awhile. How are you going to use the agency, and when? Do you want it to handle just specific assignments, or your entire public relations effort?

I suggest to you that you make those decisions in concert with your agency. Many small assignments can probably be handled by you or your staff, rather than by your agency. It's probably cheaper, too.

On the other hand, your agency is there to help if you get overloaded.

It might be more effective to add a public relations practitioner to your staff, rather than hire an agency. But don't ignore the hidden costs that always accompany staff additions, and be sure to weigh all the other pros and cons.

Hiring a person or firm to handle your public relations is one of the most important investments you'll ever make. It should be, because your public relations is the lifeblood of your company or organization.

If you use your PR agency properly to its — and your — full advantage, your return on investment will exceed your expectations a hundredfold.

That's no guarantee. But it's a promise. ■

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