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What a consultant can do for you

Working with PR Consultants

Working with professional public relations consultants reflects a significant step up in the communications sophistication of non-profit organizations. This publication is designed to help those groups as they take their next steps in shaping public opinion through the media.

More and more organizations are turning to professional public relations consultants for assistance with publicizing their issues. Typically, these organizations have some prior experience in working with the media. Groups that retain PR consultants have news to make and the institutional strength to absorb increased media scrutiny and follow-up work. Groups just getting started, those with little or no communications experience, and those with a less developed staff infrastructure are probably not be in a good position to make effective use of professional PR assistance.

Working with PR consultants can be a beneficial experience or a frustrating one. This all depends on your planning, the information you have about the consultant, and what they know about you.

The most important ingredients for success in working with a PR consultant include:

- Clear media goals.
- A good media plan.
- Knowledge of the PR consultant.

Deciding if You Have News to Make

- ✓ Is your information time-sensitive?
- ✓ Can it be “hooked” to other news or issues, federal or local legislative actions, calendar milestones or anniversaries?
- ✓ Are you releasing a new report that will alter public opinion if it gets into the press?
- ✓ Are you embarking on a specific campaign – a “day of action,” a legislative or referenda battle, a prolonged education effort – that must have a proactive media component to succeed?
- ✓ Is your news national or local in scope, or both?
- ✓ Do you want more visibility for your issue and organization in general?

When & Why to Hire a PR Consultant

Before retaining a consultant it is critical to assess your goals and resources. Here is a four-step process you should consider:

1. Do an internal capacity assessment.

Can your organization sustain increased media work and attention? This will mean working with the consultant, responding to media inquiries, and being in a possibly prolonged media “campaign” mode.

2. Ask yourself: Do we need PR help?

Can media work be handled in-house? Is media-savvy staff available to do the job and still perform their other duties? Many, if not most, nonprofit organizations do not have full-time PR staff. If you have a good news story to tell it may be time to get outside help.

3. Do you have news to make.

Retaining a PR consultant to promote your campaign implies that you have news to make. It will be best for your organization if you really do have something new to communicate. Don’t waste reporters’ time with non-news. See the “Deciding if You Have News to Make” box above.

4. Identify your goals.

It is critical that you have clear goals in mind for your media work and a media plan. The consultant’s role is to offer feedback on those goals and to help you improve your plan for achieving them. See the “Goals and Parameters Checklist.”

Typical Media Campaign Goals

The following might be the goals of a typical media campaign involving a professional PR consultant.

- The finale of a month-long campaign will be the introductions of Bill X in the state legislature with attendant press conferences and briefings.
- We want maximum media coverage in alternative and “issue” based media (e.g. environmental press, women’s media, government chan-

nels, and talk shows).

- We want three or more “hits” (articles or reports on our campaign) in major dailies in select urban markets, a hit on a wire service, and a possible hit on a national radio and/or TV talk show, plus
- The success of our campaign depends on our capacity to inform leading policy makers (or women between the ages of 18-35, for example) about our report and our issue. That’s why our messages must be crafted to resonate with these audiences.

So, Who Do We Hire?

It can be important to work with a consultant – whether an individual or a firm – that shares your political and cultural beliefs, or at least understands them. You may need a consultant to be sensitive to the nuances of the issue and you may be more comfortable working with one who has their heart in it. It is also important to retain a consultant with the necessary media connections and resources. See the “Thing to Ask Your Consultant” text box in this publication for tips.

The SPIN Project maintains a [Consultant Directory](#) on our web site. This list is not exclu-

Goals and Parameters Checklist

- Duration of the campaign.
- What you want accomplished in terms of media hits (e.g., 3-4 national media hits, 5 local hits)
- What you want accomplished for general exposure (e.g., increase awareness about issue with emphasis on moving key policy leaders).
- Reach your target audience (e.g., youth, people of color, your base, lawmakers).
- Scope of campaign (e.g., national; or national plus local or regional, multi-city action; or local only).

sive by any means and it changes frequently. We do not endorse any company or individual on this list but our experience suggests they will be aligned with your political goals. We offer it as a starting point for groups looking for outside help with their communications work.

Shop around for a PR consultant, and solicit proposals from a few consultants that seem like a good fit. Give them guidelines for what kind of media campaign you want. Before signing a contract, make sure to ask for references and get feedback from their prior clients.

What Does It Cost?

Rates can vary dramatically, so it is important to have a sense of your budget before embarking on a search for PR help. Know your range. There is no set formula for what a consultant will charge and what you get for the money, though a minimum you can expect to spend around \$5,000 for a significant media

effort. This might include placing and pitching stories, producing the press kit and arranging interviews, among other tasks. More prestigious and/or experienced consultants will charge more, ostensibly to take advantage of their greater media access.

One environmental justice group signed a contract for about \$20,000 for a major multiple week campaign that included story placement in key national media. Another organization spent about \$7,000 for a shorter campaign that scored them a handful of good media hits locally and nationally.

Although this tip sheet does not elaborate on drafting a contract, one suggested component is an “exit clause.” This will allow you to drop the PR firm if they are not delivering what you want by a certain deadline, and instead move to another firm quickly.

Price will depend on:

- Duration of the contract.

- Specific tasks agreed on (see the next section for more details).
- Prominence of the firm (big, famous firms will no doubt charge more to pay for their broader contacts and services; smaller, less established firms will charge less).
- Your goals. The more information you have and the more specific you are with your campaign goals the more you can negotiate with the PR firm.

What Will a PR Consultant Do for You? (and What Must You Do for Them?)

It is critical to have agreement with the consultant about what *exactly* they will do for you as part of the contract. For example, if they say they will “assist in working with the media to attain coverage,” ask them to be specific: Does that mean actually pitching and placing the story? Does it mean sending out the media advisory and following up with reporters? Does it include booking your spokespersons on radio or TV shows?

The following are a few tasks you can expect PR consultants to perform, which taken together will make up your media plan. As part of your contract they may be responsible for all or some of these tasks. At a minimum, you should negotiate these with the consultant and know what will be included in the cost.

- Help frame the issue for maximum media interest and help craft strategic messages.
- Assist in creating and/or implementing your media plan, while helping ensure that it is realistic and do-able. A good consultant will help you not set yourself up for failure with an overly ambitious plan.
- Write and distribute press releases and media advisories. Be clear on the editing

Things to Ask Your Consultant Before You Sign a Contract

- ✓ What are their media contacts, including print, magazine, radio and TV, alternative media, “niche” media (e.g. youth press, people of color media)? In what media markets are their best contacts located? In what media markets are they located?
- ✓ Can you see copies of past news clips from past clients?
- ✓ Can you check their references?
- ✓ Can you see an example of a successful media strategy and messages of previous clients?
- ✓ Can they help you shape the messages?
- ✓ Can you examine press kits and other materials?
- ✓ Are they familiar with online media? What web strategies have they used in the past?
- ✓ Who are their clients (do they represent people from the opposition, thus setting up a possible conflict of interest)?
- ✓ Do they personally support the politics, on some level, of your project?
- ✓ Finally, is the PR consultant *creative*? Can they come up with clever and original ideas for getting you press?

process (approvals, feedback, turn-around schedule) and deadlines for drafts.

- Produce media “deliverables,” specifically the press kit and background documents. Your staff will most likely do the major research but the consultant can help you package it into the form that reporters prefer.
- Draft or edit your opinion editorial and place it. If you are writing it, make sure to ask about deadlines, turn-around times, and the possibility of revising it between pitches.
- Make pitch calls to reporters. Will they develop the media list?
- Book you on radio/TV talk shows.
- Organize media briefings. Do they have the list of key media contacts? How many media outlets will get briefings?
- Stage and publicize media events and handle the press in attendance. This is a big logistical responsibility that you will share with the consultant. At a minimum the consultant will interact with reporters, set up interviews, distribute information and generally manage the media operation at the event. Will there be one event or do you have a multi-city media plan?
- Other tasks may include: launch and maintain website; train key spokespersons; handle and prioritize reporters’ calls; produce video press releases or radio reports; follow-up with reporters; maintain “clip service” and

A Few Caveats

- ✓ Discuss your expectations. What do you really want out of a consultant? Are your expectations reasonable?
- ✓ Undertaking media work with a PR consultant is a commitment. This realization is especially important for groups new to this kind of work. Doing media work necessitates having a big picture view and understanding that it will be a “process.” Major policy change and significant media transformation do not happen overnight. Establishing your news “credentials” with the media takes time, tenacity and intelligence.
- ✓ Hiring PR consultants gives you expert media savvy and skills, but there is no “magic media bullet.” It is never possible to predict precisely what reporter or media outlet will go for a story no matter how good the PR consultant is.
- ✓ Media work, whether in-house or contracted out, takes resources. It is critically important to incorporate media strategy into your program plan and fundraising proposals. Plan for your media.

give you copies of media hits, including broadcast transcripts.

media coverage to assess if you attained your goals.

OK, We’re Going With A PR Firm. Now What?

Have one key staff person be responsible for the interface with the consultant. PR consultants get frustrated if they must go to several people in your organization for approvals, input and so forth. Schedule regular check in meetings with the consultant who is handling your account to review progress. Create a time-line for deadlines and deliverables and stick to it. During the busiest part of the campaign expect to be in touch with the consultant several times a day. The consultant may move in to your office or close by on the big day to handle media inquiries and other activities.

Following the campaign debrief with the consultant and track

Working with professional PR consultants can be a rewarding experience that results in a successful media campaign and improved media coverage for your issue. The best consultants really want their clients to succeed and feel proud of their work on your behalf. Treat your consultant professionally and with respect and they will help you get the coverage your organization deserves. Good luck!