

In praise of partnership

By Catharine Heddle, vice-president

The best client-agency relationships are true partnerships. They're the ones in which both client and agency share as much information and feedback as possible, where objectives are aligned, and where there is a high degree of mutual understanding and trust.

On the agency side, we constantly remind ourselves that our job is to help our client be a superstar. That means understanding the business in all its nuances, as well as how communications can support those objectives. It means pushing our clients to think in new ways about how to engage their audiences. It also means developing a deep understanding of what constitutes success for our clients, and making sure that everything we do is aligned to those goals.

Clients can contribute to this by trusting us with as much information as they can reasonably share. The more we know, the better we are able to craft communications strategies that will make sense for the organization. Send us your business plan. Inform us of your market segmentation. Tell us what obstacles you face, and what plans you have to overcome them. Help us understand the intricacies of your business.

At Environics, our most productive and mutually satisfying client relationships are with companies that consider us an extension of their team. With such clients, we're informed of new developments early on; we ask probing questions about the business and share our thoughts and experiences; we understand how success is defined and we see the big picture.

At the beginning of a new engagement, it's important to provide a full business briefing to the public relations team. This briefing sets the stage for the entire relationship, and should be as broad and deep as possible. This helps the agency understand the full scope of the organization, its challenges and weaknesses as well as strengths and opportunities. The knowledge gained here can serve to keep the communications on target by helping us connect the dots between proactive awareness campaigns and complex issues management. This is also a chance for the agency to meet senior executives and to gain the trust of key corporate spokespeople.

In return, you should expect your agency to deliver proactive, strategic thinking, thoughtful analysis and creative concepts. A good public relations agency is always thinking, and the overall strategy should shine through in every tactic we propose.

If there are periodic briefings with other marketing partners, be sure to include PR. A wonderful alchemy can occur when a company's public relations, marketing, branding, advertising and events agencies work in close partnership and pull together toward the common goal.

In some cases, a "PR-101" session may also be in order at the outset of a relationship. These sessions are often given to a company's sales team, whose assistance is required in supplying customer names to serve as references for case studies or media interviews. These introduction-to-PR sessions can be a valuable way to obtain buy-in from a key constituency that may not fully understand the role of public relations.

It's not essential to have a public relations specialist "client-side" to manage the agency, but it is important to assign someone to serve as the agency's primary point of contact and source of information. Often, decisions need to be made quickly in response to a media request or opportunity, and responsiveness is important. That person can help us cultivate an excellent roster of spokespeople, build their confidence and refine their voice.

Clients should expect a no-surprise approach to budgeting and invoicing, and a clear delineation of measurable objectives at the start of each campaign. Public relations results can be measured in a variety of ways; agency and client should agree on a measurement methodology at the outset of a campaign.

Finally, a culture of open communication is key to the successful client-agency partnership. The more we know about an organization, the better we can tell its story. Both sides must demand honesty; they must accurately assess the results and offer constructive criticism as well as praise.

Underlying all of this, of course, is good, old-fashioned customer service. Along with an unflinching obsession with results, this is a recipe for a long-lasting, mutually rewarding and successful client-agency partnership – the kind on which Environics Communications was built.

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