

So, you fired your PR agency, but were you ever on the same page?

Issued by [Brandfundi](#)

21 Nov 2019

The public relations (PR) industry has fought to overcome its fair share of general negative perceptions throughout the years. We've been dubbed the "bums and balloons" in business and spin doctors, and let's not forget the infamous Bell Pottinger stunts that tarnished our profession.



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In a more recent situation, I found myself defending the discipline as a sceptic told me very confidently that PR is dying.

This individual had worked with several different PR agencies who all came highly recommended, and they all talked the textbook talk, but could not deliver on his business objectives. He wanted to sell memberships, and they failed to achieve this, so he cancelled their contracts. He'd lost faith in PR and its ability to provide any return on investment. That said, he believed not only that PR can function in isolation, but also that editorial can and should drive sales.

In another situation, during a briefing session with a prospect client, the expectation was for the PR team to raise the profile of the brand by guaranteeing that one editorial piece would be published or broadcast every week for the following three months. The previous PR agency was fired for not delivering on this.

Furthermore, a Forbes Communications Council contributor recently published a thought leadership piece about the evolving Brand-PR relationship, and how the public relations industry needs to adapt. This writer shared his experience of appointing and working with several PR agencies over the previous 15

years but fired all within a year or so. He explained that even though some of them were the best in the industry, and were all doing their best, he blamed the typical PR model, saying it was either broken or in need of change.

Having worked in the PR industry for two decades, I have witnessed the evolution of PR, and I believe it to be the smartest, most strategic tool a business can leverage to grow brand equity and generate meaningful results, especially when both the client and agency understand each other and the desired outcomes.

Many clients do not fully understand PR and associate it solely with media, press releases and events, or their expectations are unrealistic, thinking that securing editorial is guaranteed, even when there's little to no newsworthiness, and it should get the phone ringing off the hook.

Editorial coverage and even sporadic bursts of publicity are not going to drive sales, nor is it going to do anything other than increase awareness and, through consistency and frequency help to build a positive brand reputation. That said, the media landscape has noticeably changed globally, as has the PR discipline.

Today, to be effective, PR agencies need to embrace the Barcelona Principles, which focuses on measuring what matters most. These guiding principles for agencies include output (distribution, exposure, reach), outtakes (attention, awareness, understanding, engagement, participation), outcomes (learning/knowledge, attitude change, satisfaction, trust, advocacy) and impact (reputation, relationship, organisation change, public/social change).

When these elements are factored into the development of the communication objectives and are aligned to addressing core business challenges, then PR can be the most effective and formidable means to achieve results through a combination of earned, owned and paid media. As a consequence, the PR agency can add value as strategic thinkers rather than being seen simply as implementation machines.

Additionally, PR is more fruitful when trust is built between the client and the agency through strong partnerships. PR cannot work in isolation - not in terms of client access, nor in relation to other marketing channels. When a PR agency works closely with a client as an extension of the internal C-Suite and marketing team, they are able to immerse themselves in the business to understand it more quickly, identify proactive opportunities more easily, adapt to the client's company culture, and address any potential crises before they happen.

So, I challenge the sentiment that PR is dying or is ineffective because it is outdated, as the responsibility lies with both the agency and the client. Some agencies have not evolved, but that would be clear to see in their credentials. Those who have, and are 'allowed into the client's inner circle', so to speak, can deliver remarkable results. This is further affirmed by the Statista Research Department, which projects that the PR industry's revenue worldwide will grow from 14 in 2016, to 19.3 billion U.S. dollars by 2020. The growth, I believe, is attributed to an effective and strategic communication tool that is gaining more prominence as more brands begin to see and experience the true value of good PR.

PR has never been more important. In an era of fake news, brand distrust, increasing pressure on brands to demonstrate shared values and the need to exhibit positive and authentic social impact, who better than a professional PR agency partner to strategically and creatively help overcome challenges and realise the brand ambitions.

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