

The big ask

What is it clients want the most from their PR agencies? And what do PR agencies want from their clients? The answer, it turns out, is simple and not a big ask after all.

Clients want...



Rodney Knotts, head of marketing, Save the Children South Africa

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I often treat PR agencies as an extension of my team. Beyond being committed to my success, I like to work with agencies that can create powerful and vibrant content; is creative and pushes me to take more risks; listens rather than always trying to call the shots while at the same time willing to share industry knowledge; tells me the truth — the good, bad, and ugly; even though PR plans are always subject to change, I still expect a comprehensive results oriented plan to be in place for any projects we are working on; they should understand my company culture and know how to communicate it to the public; they should also be in a position to influence not only the media, but also my clients and my investors by showing a direct impact to my bottom line; and lastly, they should have global inspirations and capabilities.

Kavitha Kalicharan, corporate communications manager, Adcock Ingram

In an era where we have a multitude of PR agencies to choose from, it is a challenging process to choose the one that has the right fit for an organisation. It all starts from the beginning, where you see how well the agency has done their research of your organisation and whether they have in fact delivered on the expectations outlined in the brief provided to them or not.

Secondary deciding factors are attention to detail, how well they understand your brand and whether or not your organisation is just an account for the agency is also quite relevant.

It is also good to establish whether there is synergy between the team so that this results in a good working relationship. And lastly, whether an agency stays true to their commitment, such as delivering on their promise which is ultimately vital to an organisation meeting their deadlines.



Kavitha Kalicharan, corporate communications manager, Adcock Ingram



Dr Pranill Ramchander, head of corporate communication, Anglo American

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While this sounds like a cliché, there simply has to be chemistry between the internal team and the agency. I believe it's the client's responsibility to be clear on the brief, and the agency's responsibility to align to that brief by getting the right team on board.

With the communications environment having changed so much in the last decade or so, the client could be looking for deeper specialist skills, or simply adding operational skills to the existing team, it's critical for the agency to understand the expectation upfront and align accordingly.

In addition, the agency must clearly understand the clients strategy and be able to translate the strategy into action. Over the last few years, I've watched communications agencies evolve dramatically, agencies seem to be more open to partnering with other agencies to bring in the best possible skills.

Last year was Anglo American's centenary year and I witnessed first hand the importance of the agency relationship, and the necessity for seamless integration between agency partners.

Katherine Madley, group executive of product marketing

Expert marketers should have both a defensive and an offensive marketing strategy. The former defends their brand and current market share and the latter grows it, reaching new market frontiers and improving top line at an advancing rate superior to the competitors.

One of the most valuable skills for any business is a PR partner that can defend a brand in crises. For obvious reasons, this work is not discussed at conferences, nor publicly rewarded. Honestly, we will never know how many share prices did not fall because of expert PR practitioners helping a brand position messaging correctly to all stakeholders.

It's a valuable partnership to have and very important when choosing a partner. On the brand offensive, it's all about addictive content that connects your markets to your products and brands. The PR practitioner needs to be expert in writing and creating addictive sharable content that entertains and informs people. People get bombarded with over 150 messages a day and their attention spans are reducing. To break through, you need collaboration.



Katherine Madley, group executive of product marketing

The best work is when the PR practitioners are flying in formation with their marketing, advertising, branding, and product building partners – that's what works. Creative-led campaigns with collective disciplined specialist skills at work.



Heidi Brauer, chief marketing officer, Hollard

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For many years, I've said that it takes a village to raise a brand, and the longer I care for brands, the more I know it to be true. Marketers need to harness the collective wisdom of their villagers – the agencies – to amplify their efforts to grow their brand-child into the very best it can be. As budgets get smaller and margins are more under pressure, it's now the time for marketers to connect with PR as a cost-effective and sustainable way to tell brand stories.

As in a village, relationships in brand-universes are everything, and building a super-close connection with your PR agency is the foundation of epic work. That comes from honesty and adult-adult relationships where the brand-child is held at the centre of everything. Where we share what we know and love about the child, where we share our worries and our dreams and where we plan the future together. As we would in a village.

PR agencies want ...

Kevin Welman, ByDesign Communications

The success of any client-agency relationship is down to three things; mutual respect, chemistry and hard work. In the 20-plus years that I've been consulting in this industry, I've always seen that the best work is done for clients where mutual respect exists; if the client respects you as a consultant and a viable business partner, and that respect is returned to the client by understanding their business and acting like you are part of the team, then great things happen.

“ There simply has to be chemistry between the people working on the business, it takes a mature consultant to realise that not every client is right for you, and you are not right for every client. It's OK to turn away work because the agency culture and the client culture doesn't fit. ”

It's best as an agency to take a long-term view on every client, as the relationship starts imagine what it will look like in six

months or even in six years, if it doesn't feel right now, it probably isn't right.

And lastly, hard work - as the agency you need to be seen to be working on the relationship, working hard to deliver results, working hard to push the boundaries. In my experience, great work is not achieved through complacency.



Keri-Ann Stanton, group communications director at M&N Brands

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In the M&N Brands network (comprising Avatar Johannesburg, Avatar Cape Town, Bozza, Mela Events and Kanbar), the core thing we look for with clients is a partnership.

Whether we are creating a PR campaign or an event or an integrated campaign, a client that is a partner, who shares their pain and pressure points, is the client that allows us to solve, create and deliver meaningful work. In this pressured industry and environment. It is open and honest conversations that cut through red tape and get both parties to a place where the client feels they have had the best minds working on the best solution, and where the agency feels they have created something with purpose.



Kevin Welman, ByDesign Communications

Ruth Kolevsohn, chief operating officer at Burson-Marsteller

The traits that underpin the best relationships we have with our clients are open, two-way communication and mutual trust. Communication begins with agreement on clearly defined, measurable objectives and continuing dialogue ensures we stay on task and heads off misunderstandings. When our clients see us as their allies, confidantes and thought partners, we are able to develop a deep understanding of their business, which helps us to deliver real value to their businesses.

A key component of successful relationships is also flexibility. Needs and expectations can change very quickly. Our clients need to keep us abreast of changes in their business as well as the problems they are facing, so that we can adjust plans to meet their most critical needs. Relationships based on these traits stand the test of time. Over the past 25+ years, Burson Cohn & Wolfe Africa has established enduring partnerships with clients across the continent.



Ruth Kolevsohn, chief operating officer at Burson-Marsteller

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