

Media Maven Mike

PR Consultant or In-House Specialist?



by Mike Janes

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Firms wishing to upgrade their public relations image often face a difficult question: Do we add to our in-house staff or hire an outside agency or consultant? A simple analysis focusing on the pros and cons of each will help you make a sound decision.

In-house: more in-tune?

The advantages of hiring a full-time public relations specialist are many, but at the top of the list is the satisfaction of having in your office 9-to-5 someone who can absorb the subtleties and intricacies of your business on a daily basis. Public relations agencies often do terrific work, but they always will have other clients who demand their time and attention. An in-house specialist is just that: someone who specializes in PR and your company and its work. Agencies or consultants simply can't attend every staff meeting, chit-chat regularly with department heads and firm principals, or get the inside track on what's coming up. A staff member can.

Agencies, however, generally bring with them a wealth of expertise, savvy, and media contacts that a hired public relations specialist might not possess. This can be especially pertinent if the PR manager you bring on board has three years or less of hands-on PR experience.

With myriad resources at their disposal, PR firms can be enormously helpful with writing, logistics, pitching, and crisis communications. A public relations agency or consultant may be especially valuable if you have one specific project or initiative that requires "all hands on deck." During the selection process, you can (and should) require that each proposal outline specific experience and expertise that indicates the agency's ability to get the results you're looking for. An in-house specialist, generally speaking, will offer only broad communications experience and usually can't match the resources or manpower of a full-service agency.

Cost and other factors

Cost, of course, always will be one of the deciding factors in handling your PR staff needs. Depending on the market and the availability of qualified communications professionals in your region, you might expect to pay anywhere from \$30,000 per year for a PR manager with two to four years of experience to \$100,000 or more for a savvy communications wizard (and staff) with 10 years or more of experience. A consulting agency can be paid in a variety

of ways (project-by-project, annual retainer, performance-based), but the rates generally will be higher than a staff member due to overhead costs and the like.

Other questions you'll need to ask yourself include:

- Is your firm overwhelmed on a daily basis with simple yet time-consuming PR-related calls? (If so, an in-house staff member may be the way to go.)
 - Are you able to cope with the occasional press release but are in dire need of big-picture issues management and PR counsel? (A consultant might work best.)
 - Do you really need someone who knows your firm inside-and-out and can constantly be on the lookout for PR opportunities? (In-house!)
 - Would you like to hire away a PR superstar from a well-known association and pay him or her a cool six-figures? (Contact Mike Janes immediately—mjanes@aia.org)
- (Ed. note: Former editors also make great PR persons!)*

A PR person, whether an in-house staff member or an outside vendor, can offer a whole new dimension to your firm. Representing the company at local business functions, placing stories in the regional Business Journal or daily newspaper, designing innovative brochures and visual materials, or just serving as a jack-of-all-trades on communications issues can all be a part of your public relations director's job description. With a bit of thought and reflection, you can bring on the right PR pro who will provide the best fit for your needs.