

How to hire a public relations firm

by Mark Buzan

UNDoubtedly, few public sector executives come across a department without a need or capacity for communications services. Most departments, if not all, have specialists in communicating department policy. However, special projects can arise, creating challenges beyond the current bandwidth of in-house staff. Then the need for contracting out the services of a public relations consultant or an agency becomes pertinent.

Purchasing PR services, however, is very different than other commodities or services that most government executives will acquire in the course of their career. To begin, it can be difficult to clearly quantify a firm value for public relations consulting at the outset. How much is charged largely depends on the scope of the project, the expertise required, the timeframe for completion, and the degree of creative investment required. The combination of these factors can make it difficult for many PR professionals to respond to government RFPs.

Developing a PR campaign is a creative process. It requires communications professionals to have the benefit of understanding your department's culture and needs through open dialogue. With that in mind, there are a number of best practices public sector purchasers of PR services should bear in mind when issuing an RFP.

First, because the development of a proposal, or even a campaign model, requires time to develop, it is best to allow sufficient time for respondents to provide a thorough response. Between the time word gets out to the PR community, from the time an agency makes the decision to respond to an RFP, and finally to the point where a proposal is submitted, significant time can elapse. I recommend a deadline period of 45 to 60 days from the point of issuing an RFP to the point of closing.

Inform agencies what you will be considering in making your final selection. From

the beginning, articulate basic requirements such as desired agency capabilities, locations and firm size, as well as any potential conflicts, to enable firms to determine if they have the qualifications to participate. Also, PR professionals understand that from time to time public sector executives may have agencies or consultants with whom they have worked in the past. As a result, if an incumbent agency or other competitor has an advantage going into a competition, disclose this to other agencies.



When you establish an RFP and the requirements therein, ask yourself if those requirements are really needed and why. How pertinent, relevant, or in line are the requirements with standard public relations industry practices? Before issuing an RFP, I recommend speaking with one of Canada's public relations professional associations: the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) or the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). Seek their advice on whether your requirements are reasonable.

Once the requirements and the process have been established and agencies are committed to participate, clients should not make changes unless absolutely essential.

To assure qualified agencies accept your invitation to participate in a search, provide them with essential information about your organization and its needs. It is also wise to be forthcoming and transparent on the names and contacts of those likely to need the public relations services. In some cases, those purchasing PR services seek to conduct the initial phase of a search without disclosing the name of the client organization or the other information agencies feel they must consider when deciding whether to participate in a search.

For PR professionals to be effective, we really do need to understand where your needs are coming from and what the overall challenges are that have led to the call for an RFP. If you are only able to provide the name of the central procurement officer and not the eventual officer with whom the PR firm will be interacting, consider having an open question and answer session inviting candidate firms to participate.

Finally, throughout the process, please understand that developing a proposal in response to an RFP requires a significant amount of intellectual capital. Using creative concepts or ideas presented by competitors not selected is highly inappropriate. In cases where creative concepts are presented during a search process, those concepts and ideas should remain the property of the proposer. In some cases, clients decide following a search that they would like to use ideas or concepts presented during the search for a PR firm. Under these circumstances, clients should negotiate proper compensation with the agency that presented the ideas or concepts. *MB*

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