



# *Key Questions:*

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## *To Ask Your PR Agency*

Helping to build credibility and  
trust amongst those who matter

**zen**<sup>o</sup>  
COMMUNICATIONS

*We don't*  
REPORT  
THE NEWS  
*We*  
CREATE  
HEADLINES

## 1

## What do you need to know about my business before you can get started?

Of all of the questions, we think that this is the most telling... PR agencies fall into two main camps. Those who report the news, and those who create it. News reporters will get you into the paper and you may even receive a call or two off the back of it – with the wind in the right direction and your fingers crossed of course. News creators will want you to share as much about your business plan as you can. Who are you targeting? What do you want them to do or say? What does success look like? How are we measuring success? What's most commercially advantageous for you? And a fair few more too. This way, they'll be able to create a bespoke strategy that actually achieves more than just coverage for the sake of it.

## 2

## What services does the agency offer?

In the 'good' old days, press releases were king. Agencies willingly put them together based on the messaging their clients wanted to share, sent them out to all and sundry, and hoped their journalist contacts would be kind enough to publish them. But there are so many other ways to share your story with those who matter most to you. And, choosing the right one for your communications - and the one that's going to have the most impact - depends on so many factors. So, if your chosen agency focuses purely on press releases and doesn't even broach the subject of anything relating to opinion-led articles, interviews and profiles, speaking opportunities, and lead magnets - then you could be missing a huge trick.

## 3

### **What if disaster strikes? Do you have the experience to manage negative news?**

Here, your prospective agency should be telling you about their relevant issues management experience. They should be telling you how they can set up an emergency reactive press office for you and their strategies to prevent, mitigate, and manage negative news. They should have tangible examples of what they've done - and for whom. If they don't, then they're probably going to be Googling 'issues management' the second you get off the phone or walk out of the door. And here's a note to look for - if they call it 'crisis management' and then refer to anything other than Armageddon-type situations, they've read it in a book somewhere and probably aren't the experts they claim to be.

## 4

### **What experience and media contacts do you have in my sector?**

Lots of smaller PR agencies have very select experience - that is they've worked in some very specific sectors - and if those don't include yours then they're unlikely to be able to make the impact you want straight away. Sure, they can develop those contacts, but make sure you seek a guarantee from them that this won't be in your time, and set some service level agreements to ensure they generate the results. Ideally you're looking for someone who already speaks your language, has contacts, and knows what works.

## 5

## How will you measure success with my account?

Now this is a good one. Lots of the less experienced or less reputable agencies won't tell you that they can absolutely prove the return on your investment. You can agree specific key performance indicators such as web traffic, PR use of specific (and searchable) key words, or you can track and monitor your success through your coverage through something called AVE. That's Advertising Value Equivalent, which considers the equivalent value – how much the coverage would have cost on this page, on this day, presented in this way, if you'd paid for it. Each agency will use a different matrix, although typically, using AVE alone won't give you much of use. Using it alongside other factors, however, will. That's considering AVE alongside the impact of the coverage, whether it was well targeted, whether it met the brief, and whether the agreed psychological drivers were there. We can do this by looking closely at the audience suitability, impact and quality, quantitative inclusion of agreed core messages, and more.

## 6

## Do you work for anyone else in my sector?

Whilst not illegal, we think PR agencies representing companies in the same sector, same town, and working with the same clients, is plain bad form. After all, these guys are supposed to be your cheerleaders, your pom-pom-carrying, looking-for-every-opportunity, totally-committed-to-you team. And how can they share that? Any agency worth its salt will make you aware of any potential conflict of interest, and then it's up to you whether you feel the boundaries are clear enough.

ANY  
AGENCY



Worth Its Salt

*will make you aware of any*

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**CONFLICT  
OF INTEREST**

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## 7

## Who would be leading my account and how much PR experience have they got?

Make sure that you're not being passed onto the office junior once you take your agency on board, and that the person leading your account has at least five years experience. In-house expertise – where the person worked for an organisation, looking after their PR only – can be great if the company is in the same sector as you, but ideally you're looking for someone who's spent at least a little time working for an agency, as they're likely to have more wide-reaching skills, media contacts, and experience.

As an additional nugget, do remember that...



## The Biggest is Not Always the Best

Some of the biggest PR agencies are based in London, Manchester and Birmingham. They might be on the list of 'top 150 PR companies', and might have some national awards under their belt. But do remember that the 'biggest' aren't always the best, and they don't automatically deserve your attention. Having access to a PR agency's senior team can be extremely valuable when you want that senior expertise, support and guidance. That's a service which can be difficult to get at a large agency, and equally, freelance and start-ups often won't have the experience or man-power you need. It's a little like Goldilocks – choose an agency based on how valuable the service you'll receive is to your business, and don't base your decision solely on cost, size or first-glance 'calibre'. That way your porridge will be perfect.



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