

Agency vs In-House: the Pros and Cons

Successful communications all begin with bright, fresh ideas but branding continuity requires a deeper organisational understanding. This is the age-old debate of agency versus in-house which is back in the spotlight as organisations re-evaluate their marketing strategies in line with economic recovery.

In this whitepaper, we question where successful communications begin: with fresh, open minds or longevity and a deep understanding of the brand?

Daniel Donovan, the former PR manager at Corel Corporation, told Cision that he needs to be in complete control of his world:

‘The best thing about working as part of an in-house communications team is the incredibly diverse workload - I could be writing and issuing a press release, dealing with media enquiries, pitching for news coverage or promoting Corel’s messages on social and interacting with customers and businesses.

‘Other days I could be organising and hosting a launch event, catching a flight to run a press tour in Europe, or media monitoring, and attending management meetings, promoting the PR team’s successes internally.’

Even agency staff can see the benefits of keeping things in-house. Wildwood PR’s Simon Bennett readily acknowledges the value of in-depth knowledge and insight to be found client-side. He believes that in-house staff are a great resource, with greater knowledge of their products and the industry in which they operate:

‘PR agencies work with multiple, varied clients that can mean juggling priorities,’ he admits.

Obviously Simon also insists on the value an agency can bring, whether providing high-level external perspectives or covering basic back-office tasks:

‘PR agencies are full of creative people who can bring a fresh approach to your PR, and can add valued support when needed including the writing of press releases, copywriting, managing social media or handling the logistics of a trade show or exhibition.’

Peter Kane, director at Lucid PR, also believes that agency staff can effectively act as an extension of an in-house comms team - provided they have sufficient understanding of the business:

‘The more your PR agency can understand about the intricacies surrounding any project, the more likely they are to come up with fresh ideas and strategies which are pragmatic and more suited to your organisation’s objectives.’

This level of communication from in-house teams to their agency colleagues leaves little to chance and misinterpretation - and it's just as important when the work is non-advisory.

Zoe Arthur, social media manager at Royal Mail, works in a large and well-resourced communications team that uses agencies on an ad-hoc basis. She points out one of the greatest perils of outsourcing such work:

'There is a disconnect that often comes from a lack of attention to detail when discussing the brief, along with a lack of in-depth research to back up any suggestions or ideas presented.'

Many companies are now choosing to rely primarily on in-house teams and out-source work to specialist marketing agencies if and when needed.

Nina Barough, CEO of charity Walk the Walk, which provides a smaller example of an internal team handling most communications while using agencies for special projects. Nina prefers to work with PR agencies who are:

'Realistic and do not over-promise.... Agencies get really excited with the brand and project and have promised great things but do not always follow through.'

Unsurprisingly, it's all about good communication. Ross Ballantyne, marketing manager at DHL Supply Chains, emphasises the importance of a thorough agency induction into the client's world:

'I can't emphasise enough how important it is to provide the agency with a thorough induction into your ways of working, strategies, people, customers, successes, failures – show them your product and explain what is unique about it, take them to your premises and show them the services you provide and what's so special.'

A PR agency is expected to hit the ground running and be the voice of the company almost immediately. This takes time and patience, so getting the agency on board with a full induction process plays the most critical role in my eyes.'

Lucid's Peter Kane confirms that agencies too depend on a clear, candid, up-front dialogue in order to succeed:

'Be clear on the brief and your expectations. Think about not just how you want a project delivered but how you want it reported to you. Have project outcomes agreed and insist on contact notes that show timescales, actions and responsibilities.'

That's good advice whether you're directing an agency or an in-house team. Because, as Zoe says, the right approach isn't necessarily in-house, or agency, or both; it's the one that delivers results.

'Digital media has changed PR and no longer is it about purely about press releases and campaign planning - it is today about tools and technology and embracing the right ones to take your message farthest. If your in-house team has the resources or the skills to provide that, it's great. If not, outsource it.'

So there you have it, the pros and cons of in-house and agency PR but the question that remains is what can be done about it?

Combat the negatives with these essentials tips that will be sure to improve communications and brand strategy, no matter which side of the fence you are on.

| Tips for In-House | Tips for Agency |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When working with an agency, provide a full induction to your organisation.• Be your brand: make sure your contact details appear on all your emails• Listen and learn from your PR agency – they bring special skill sets• Avoid neglecting any form of communication• Engage with departments internally: they are also your clients.• Access a PR software tool to make your job easier: from managing media mentions to connect with connecting with freelancers and influencers across the board. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Think of the external stakeholders and refer to the brief• Engage a PR software tool to identify and connect with freelancers and bloggers• Research the most recent campaigns and find out what the competition is doing• Provide your client with insight into your agency. What happens? What is the culture?• Manage client expectations, don't over-promise and under deliver• Keep all interactions positive and respond quickly |