

# ABERFIELD

POSITIVE INFLUENCE

## Revealed: The 10 most important questions to ask a PR agency

**(The inside secrets to help you make the right appointment)**

You want to hire a PR agency. Maybe you have one already and you're reviewing your needs, or you're looking to appoint an agency for the first time.

Let's assume you've shortlisted three or four agencies for an initial meeting. This is your opportunity to find out more about them, to see which of them could potentially be your agency partner, and work out which aren't suitable.

The problem is, these agency "beauty parades" aren't always ideal for helping you separate the wheat from the chaff – unless you know what questions to ask.

Over the years we've answered hundreds of questions from potential clients. Some of us have also worked in-house, so we've sat on the other side of the table and asked the questions. How an agency responds often tells you more than a forest-worth of case studies.

Which is why we've used that experience to create a list of the **TEN BEST** questions to ask a PR agency. The questions every agency needs to answer...and answer well.

And why would we want to reveal the questions that make agency folk twitchy?

Because there's good agencies, and there's bad ones. And when clients work with bad agencies, it gives the rest of us a bad name. It can also put the clients off hiring another PR agency in the future. Which would be a real shame.

So print off the list (they're in no particular order), and take it with you to every agency meeting you have.

We guarantee it will help you make a better appointment.

### **1. What do you know about us that we don't already know ourselves?**

How often do you meet with an agency team and they explain at great length how much research they've done into your business and how much knowledge they've gained. They will probably describe it as "insight", but then tell you all the things you already know: your market size, key competitors, positioning etc.

You shouldn't expect them to know more about your business than you do, but they should certainly be able to add some new thinking.

### **2. What can you do that any other PR agency couldn't do?**

If you're seeing a few agencies, chances are they'll all have good credentials, and they'll have a certain way of presenting them. Agencies hate this question because you're asking them directly not just what makes them different from their competitors, but what makes them better. But you have to communicate why you stand out from your competitors, so why shouldn't your agency do the same?

### **3. What makes you think you're the right agency partner for us?**

A not dissimilar question, but the focus is as much about the relationship between you and the agency as it is about the agency's 'difference' or its track record. You could be working with the agency for the next few years, so how it answers this question will give you a better idea of whether that relationship could work.

### **4. Who will be my account manager?**

The account manager may not be the most senior person you meet from the agency (they may not even be in the room!) but your relationship with that person is key. He or she will have more contact with you and your team than anyone else at the agency, and will be managing both the agency team and the PR programme. So choose the right account manager, not just the right agency.

### **5. How much of my/our time will be required?**

You don't want to be babysitting your PR agency, but at the same time you're entrusting them with your brand's reputation, so it's only right to want to have some involvement in the strategy and key decisions. It's up to you and the agency to get the balance right. So if the agency answers with a version of what we've just said, you should be reassured. If, on the other hand, the answer is on the lines of "Very little, just leave everything to us" or "Quite a lot, we like to involve our clients in everything" it's time to start worrying.

### **6. Which of those clients/case studies you've referred to did this team actually work on?**

Remember that you're not buying the agency, you're buying the people in it. You might be impressed with a great piece of work the agency did for another client, but if those individuals aren't available to you, what's the point?

### **7. How do I know I'm getting original ideas and not just ideas you've re-hashed from previous clients?**

It's a tricky question because, as the saying goes, "there's no such thing as an original idea". In PR, most things have been done before, and the agency shouldn't be afraid to admit that, particularly if the idea worked well before and is relevant. But it should still be able to demonstrate that the approach it's suggesting for you is different enough to stand out.

And if you're looking to appoint an agency on a retainer basis, and creativity is important, don't just appoint on the strength of one idea. Goalkeeper Pat Jennings once scored a goal for Arsenal, but that didn't make him a centre forward. You want an agency that can hit the target regularly, not just 'fluke' one.

### **8. Tell me about a campaign for a client that didn't work**

We all love to talk about our best campaigns – the ones that delivered the best results, or won the biggest awards. But not every PR campaign is successful. You might have great insight, creative ideas and outstanding execution, but for whatever reason it just doesn't impact with your target audience. Or the Pope resigns on the same day!

This question isn't just to test the agency's honesty, it's to gain an understanding of how it dealt with that campaign failure. Because next time it fails that client could be you.

### **9. How do you plan to measure success?**

It is often said (mainly by advertising folk!) that PR isn't measurable. Well, it is, it's just that the industry has been pretty bad historically at demonstrating its value. The PRCA and CIPR are doing a lot to encourage agencies to evaluate the impact of their activities more effectively, but sadly a lot of agencies are stuck in the 1980s when it comes to measurement.

Evaluation based on advertising values, OTS etc is fundamentally flawed. If the agency doesn't suggest more qualitative and evidence-based measures of success, be prepared to accept you may never know whether your investment was well spent. Either that, or choose another agency.

### **10. Are you open to a payment-by-results arrangement?**

No matter how tempting it may seem to only pay an agency based on the results it achieves, don't choose a PR agency that agrees to this.

Why? Well, for a start you wouldn't dream of employing a brand manager on a commission-only basis, so why would you think of employing a PR agency on those terms?

PR doesn't come with guarantees, so any agency that says it's happy to 'guarantee' its results (usually connected to coverage targets) to get paid is going to focus solely on those targets, at the expense of actually making a measurable difference to your business.

By all means agree measurable targets so you can assess the agency's performance, and review the relationship on that basis, but don't ask it if you want the answer to be 'Yes'.