PRomoting your business

Whatever your business, PR is vital. So how do you choose an agency?

From individual restaurants to international hotel chains, publicity is paramount to success in the hospitality sector and to make a lasting connection with consumers, public relations is key.

Using copywriting, media relations, corporate identity and strategic planning, PR aims to inspire brand recognition in the general public. Advertisements win new business, but by keeping your company in the public eye, it is PR that builds customer loyalty and may even make your brand a household name.

What is public relations?

The two professional PR bodies, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) and the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) agree on a basic definition of public relations. According to both, PR is about reputation – the result of what your company does and says, as well as what other people say about it.

Jessica Molloy, the CIPR's PR and marketing manager, expands on the theme:

"Every company has a reputation whether it wants one or not, even if only through word of mouth," she says.

"PR gives a brand the chance to manage its reputation through relationships with the public, business contemporaries and the media."

The PRCA's communications director Martin Cairns believes successful PR brings multiple benefits to leisure businesses. He comments:

"Hospitality companies can use public relations to achieve a wide array of objectives; develop business, grow reputation and increase awareness within the marketplace."

Before you start

To use PR to its full effect, a number of different factors must be understood. First, and perhaps most obvious, is that reputation management and business development are time consuming, ongoing tasks. Equally important to Molloy is understanding public relations' necessary complexity:

"Public relations involves a huge number of different elements," she says.

"Too many people regard it as simple media relations, but there is a great deal more to it than that."

Before even considering what your campaign should entail however, you should answer the following questions:

- Why are you using PR? Public relations only brings success to an already strong service or product. For a faltering business, increased publicity is likely to lead to increased criticism.
- Do you know your customers? If you don't know what the public expects from you, your campaign will appear unfocused and poorly thought out, losing rather than winning public support.
- What are you looking for? Attracting more people through your door is the most common aim of a PR campaign, but do you know exactly who you want and how to reach them?

When you've answered these questions, consider your next step carefully. As Molloy's and Cairns' comments suggest, PR is a full-time job which few managers in the hospitality sector have time to do themselves.

The CIPR website lists 12 key elements of public relations, at least a handful of which are absolutely necessary if any campaign is to succeed:

Media relations. Building and maintaining close relationships with trade media and reporters can give your business a head start in securing coverage.

Marketing (of products, services and issues). Keep abreast of trends and use the zeitgeist to promote your business and services.

Copy-writing. From press releases to advertorials, your publicity literature is your first

line of contact with most of the public and must be concise, understandable and above all interesting.

Press office. Make sure someone is always available to arrange interviews, handle press enquiries or make statements to reporters.

Online PR. The internet offers a rare opportunity to communicate directly with potential customers, but a poorly maintained website has the same effect as a poorly maintained property.

Media/presentation training. Handling interviews and press conferences can be daunting without prior training. Learn how to make the most of the media opportunities you get.

Sponsorship. Work hard to get involved with local, national and even international events that may be relevant to your business.

Event and conference management. Your launches and events are many people's first experience of your company. Make sure every angle is covered.

Research. Keep up with the latest industry developments and public opinion. Attracting new customers is much easier if you know what else is out there.

Evaluation. Is your latest approach working? If not, why not? Find out what, if anything, you need to be doing to stay ahead of the pack.

Corporate identity. When people hear your company name, what do they think? Control your corporate image with branding, publicity, products and partnerships.

Strategic planning. Where are you now? Where do you want to be? How will you get there?

Choosing a partner

Faced with the pressures of running a business, few managers have time to deliver a detailed PR campaign. Most turn instead to one of three options – training an existing member of staff, employing a professional practitioner, or appointing a PR consultancy.

Someone from within your company has the advantage of starting the job in full possession of the facts about the business and the experience of what might work for your customers. However, Cairns warns that an appointment from within carries its own problems:

"Companies really need to consider how serious they are about PR and ensure they're not just conscripting a reluctant member of staff to the position," he says.

> "A best practice guide for creating a brief could be the most valuable thing you read this year."

"That's not to say an existing employee could not step in, but they would need extensive training before they would be able to make the most of a full-scale PR programme."

Employing a professional practitioner solves the potential problems of reluctance and lack of PR training. Any qualified member of the PRCA or CIPR will be able to hit the ground running, identify your key audience and run a well thought-out and planned campaign.

Even so, recruiting from outside your company still requires a significant investment of time. Finding the right person can be a protracted process and in contrast to an internal appointee, your new recruit will require some degree of training.

Another factor to consider when weighing up your options is whether your business can afford to provide an in-house agent or team with the resources they need. If not, an external agent or consultancy will prove a more effective option.

At first glance, hiring externally can appear more expensive than putting an in-house team together, but adding potential overheads to the basic salary you offer generally narrows the gap.

The main advantage of hiring an independent solo practitioner is flexibility – most will be able to change their working patterns to accommodate you. Equally, independents' overheads are often lower than those of consultancies. The strengths of consultancies, however, lie in their size.

A consultancy can call on a number of staff, with expertise in every area of PR. You should also be able to find many companies with in-depth knowledge of the wider hospitality industry and through regular meetings you can bring them up to date with your specific business needs.

Through regular contact over previous campaigns, most PR agencies already have close links to relevant journalists, as well as relationships with specialist suppliers such as photographers, printers and designers. However, geographical considerations should play a part in your decision, as a London consultancy might not be the best choice if your target audience is based exclusively in Northumberland.

Whatever your preference, Molloy believes it is vital to bear personality in mind when making your decision on a PR agent.

"Over the next weeks, months or even years, you will be working very closely with whoever you choose," she says, "so chemistry is vital."

Making contact

Even after narrowing down the options using the advice above, you are still likely to have a long list of potential partners. At this point, both the CIPR and PRCA can help. The CIPR's Matchmaker service and PRCA's PReview match your requirements to the practitioners on their database. Both can be accessed on the internet.

Other methods to consider include talking to colleagues in the industry about their PR experiences, reading the PR press, or contacting journalists for advice on who's out there.

Try to narrow the list down to three or four candidates, then set up meetings to discover what each can offer you and whether you can work closely with them in the future.

Molloy offers a final piece of advice to anyone hoping to direct a successful campaign:

"Whoever you choose to work with," she says, "make sure you let them into the centre of your business and make them aware of everything that's going on. PR will only succeed from a position of careful and considered planning."

Cairns offers another outlook:

"A good PR firm that runs a great campaign and delivers it on budget will not deliver the desired outcome if the original brief is badly constructed or pointed in the wrong direction. A best practice guide for creating a brief could be the most valuable thing you read this year."

For more information on PR, including choosing a practitioner to work with, visit the CIPR website at: www.ipr.org.uk and the PRCA website at: www.prca.org.uk.

A best practice guide to preparing a brief is available at: www.clientbrief.info. ❐