

Stockholm Syndrome: alive and well in the PR industry

 By [James Wilson](#)

14 Oct 2016

What is it about us PR people that makes us fall on our proverbial swords at the very sniff of client conflict?

I see it again and again, dedicated, hardworking consultants, hell bent on meeting client needs, no matter what the cost, personal or otherwise, resulting in total tunnel vision. Every time the client says 'jump', the consultant says 'how high?' Whilst this might sound like music to certain clients' ears, it's not sustainable. Not only isn't it sustainable but the consultancy takes a massive knock because the right answer isn't always 'yes.' The ability to disagree and provide a different viewpoint to our clients' is one of the most important assets we have in our communications arsenal. Without clear boundaries, we have what I'd like to euphemistically call 'PR [Stockholm Syndrome](#).'



© Neiron – [123RF.com](#)

We are our own worst enemies in this industry. As a generalisation, I think it's because many people within the broader marketing and communications discipline are, by nature, people pleasers. This isn't a bad thing when it comes to client service, but it can become a disastrous trait if it isn't closely managed.

At the beginning of any new relationship or contract, clients engage with PR consultancies based on the rules of engagement outlined by both parties. If the PR consultancy doesn't co-set its **own** boundaries and rules of engagement, then the average client won't know how to engage or what those boundaries are. And, guess what, if things become unstuck, it's not the client's fault. It's the agency's fault for not being clear from the outset. Clients only treat us badly if we let them.

Make no mistake, in any service-based business, the consultant should be on their proverbial toes, continually finding ways to delight and guide their clients in the right direction. 'The customer is always right' should be a mantra we largely live by, as it sets the right attitude and is more likely to garner great results. The last thing you'd expect from any agency or partner is belligerence and lack of imagination when it comes to challenges and opportunities. I've sat on both sides of the fence, and I know what the pain points are.

The best relationships are based on partnerships and mutual respect. They require a level of maturity from both client and agency. Mutual respect allows for open and honest dialogue and, ultimately, a long and fruitful partnership. I'd like to share the following scenarios that may indicate the onset of 'Stockholm Syndrome' and what you could do to avoid falling into the trap:

- Your client constantly refers to you not by your name but as 'my agency.' This implies a sense of ownership. Here you should jump forward and say something along the lines of 'Thank you x, my name is x, pleased to meet you.' Personalise yourself and your unique brand upfront as well as the service you offer.
- You receive inadequate or no briefs and immediate client turnaround requests. This needs to be nipped in the bud quickly. Always push for a thorough brief and ask what the purpose of something is – how does it tie into the broader communications plan and business strategy? Set realistic expectations in terms of turnaround times, otherwise you'll find yourself permanently on the back foot.
- Linked to the above, you have an account director, or line manager in your agency, who says yes to every single client request, no matter how unreasonable, unrealistic or inane. It's so important here to push back – or at least question why something is being done. Newbies to the PR industry learn by example, not just by what their leaders say.

These are just a small sample of scenarios that should sound an early warning bell. To avoid 'Stockholm Syndrome' setting in, the most important thing we can do as an industry is to be resolutely clear and firm with our partners, clients and stakeholders.

ABOUT JAMES WILSON

James is a communications and marketing specialist with more than 17 years' experience. He has worked in agencies and in-house, giving him the full scope of agency and client life...

- Big banks don't cry - but new research shows maybe they should - 3 Dec 2018
- Lessons from Everest: Protecting your reputation doesn't have to be like climbing a mountain - 14 Dec 2016
- Stockholm Syndrome: alive and well in the PR industry - 14 Oct 2016
- Of doers and criticisers - 25 Aug 2016
- Make the circle bigger: Growing an agency with startup clients - 11 Aug 2016

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>