

Project or retainer for your PR? What to choose when



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29 Aug 2016

Unless you're a blue-chip who needs a professional PR on-call in case a crisis comes up, you may wonder whether you need a retainer or if a project will do. Both have their merits but should be chosen, like most things, with some know-how. Here are the pros and cons of both.

Retainers:

If you're looking to build a brand or create trust and buy-in, then a regular, month-by-month approach may work. Creating credibility takes time and is not a one-hit wonder; instead it means knowing which influencers are the right ones to talk to, and then feeding them with relevant (read: what the audience wants to hear, not what you want to say) information on a regular basis.

Being seen as a thought leader doesn't happen overnight and building an image of expertise means having a solid opinion about industry news or views. It can get tiring, as, let's face it, not everyone has the time to analyse new developments in their field and then develop a discerning review about it. But to build buy-in, that's what it takes; a constant stream of insight and putting yourself out there as an expert with something meaningful to say about your industry, not your product.

Retainers also mean you have a professional PR consultant or team on standby ready to jump on an opportunity and position you around it. Not to mention the close relationship you'll develop as well as the knowledge and IP they'll develop over time about your brand or business.



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Then there's strategy. Once-off projects often don't build in the time or resource to come up with well-considered market insight, goals, positioning and messaging – fundamentals of effective communication that should be in place if any reliable outcomes are to be achieved.

The downside of retainers however is that they can become sluggish as, without anything fresh to say, content runs the risk of being created just for the sake of it. This isn't good for you, your PR or the channel you're sharing it on. Rather, break down retainers into e.g. quarterly chunks where, in an annual period, four campaigns are rolled-out. This breaks the challenge of coming up with another editorial angle to generate some ink or airplay about and – with a few months' gap between your communication – allows you to keep reinventing yourself with something new to say.

If a retainer is the route you'd like to go, then be aware that agency fees exclude hard costs like design, travel, production, media spend, etc. Also bear in mind, the higher your fee the more resource you will have i.e. time available to do the work or scope; conversely the lower it is the less you have. R10k a month does not deliver what R100k a month will. It's simple maths yet is often misunderstood. A Golf's budget does not a Porsche buy.

Projects:

Ideal for individual campaigns or events that have a clear objective e.g. drive votes, acquire sign-ups or sell tickets. Projects are fast and furious and often come with an integrated offering, pulling in social media, digital marketing, design and offline tie-ins and partners.

They're also very effective at getting the message out, at high voltage, to the right audience. For instance, if you're an organiser of a wine or food festival, you need ticket sales in the month and weeks leading up to the show. Or what about the launch of a new product or retail store? A retainer isn't going to get the burst of exposure that you need while an intensive project allows you to hit all the right influencers over a concentrated time, delivering you maximum share of voice when you need it. Let's face it: out of sight is out of mind. So efforts should be concentrated and burst across media, blogger and influencer channels making your story hard to miss.

Projects also keep energy levels and interests high. Despite their fast pace, they're new and fun, which makes creating original ideas easier than reinventing the wheel month after month.

The potential risks of projects are that key planning and evaluation can be overlooked. With a set budget that needs to stretch to the max, building in time (read: money) to understand who you're talking to, what their preferred channels are, creating compelling content and then analysing performance may seem unrealistic within the available scope. But to really make the campaign take-off it's advised that a little extra fat is available to do it justice.

Projects range in fees depending on the length of the campaign and objectives e.g. four months to drive votes from consumers. They also work best when there is a budget to use to e.g. create an activation, partner with an influencer or blogger, or produce high quality videos or visuals. Again Golf ≠ Porsche.

The best of both worlds:

To get the most bang for your buck, marry the two structures: Allocate budget to get the thinking done properly so you know that your campaign will be targeted at the right people at the right time, and have a little leftover so efforts can be reviewed and evaluated; after all isn't measurement everything these days? Then, launch a powerful project – consider four a year if you're on retainer - that spikes a campaign across a host of different mediums. It's focused, it's fun and it delivers.

As PR continues to change shape and form, it makes sense that its structure does, too. The days of the retainer that

delivered a fat book of media clippings every month are coming to an end; there just isn't the editorial space in traditional publications to warrant it, audiences have moved on to other communication channels and publicity alone is not enough to move the needle. By combining the pros of a retainer – strategy and analysis, relationship and trust – with those of a project – fast, fun and focused – you'll see real results in the form of sign-ups, votes, sales or visits. Which is why you hired a PR team in the first place.

When you're in the market looking for a PR, keep this advice in mind. Knowing what you want before you brief someone new will help save you and them a lot of time and possible disappointment, especially if you're looking for a spike in traffic to your website yet opted for a publicity retainer. In this case, a focused project that integrates with digital as well as industry or pop culture influencers is a lot more effective than a monthly flow of publicity. Unless of course your goal is to position yourself as an industry thought leader. If this is the case you'll want the regular exposure month after month so that you can then share it on your website, social networks and in your newsletters and other marketing channels to increase its reach and longevity.

ABOUT REBECCA CRONJE

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