The Three Keys to Pay-for-Performance Publication Relations

As one of the earliest leaders in the pay-for-performance public relations space, we've seen more than our share of success stories with our clients, and confusion about what clients should look for, and expect, from any agency relationship. We're happy to offer these brief guidelines to help your company or agency decide if a results-based program model is right for you:

Media Relations at a Premium

What clients and execs want is coverage, and often when they want it is now. For agencies and internal teams, this can create workload issues and divert already-assigned program fees. The reality is these stakeholders may salivate at the thought of a write-up in the LA Times or a featured spot on CNBC, but there's much groundwork that needs to be laid before such coverage is even realistic. Bringing in a pay-for-performance PR team can create essentially a dedicated "point person" whose task is to deliver the identified opportunity, work within the PR team's strategic parameters, and deliver results that support the partnership. The motivating force that keeps everyone on track is that there's no payment unless the desired media coverage happens. Many a time this sort of additional firepower can be very useful, indeed.

Even with decades of executive agency experience, I've yet to find two clients that are exactly alike. Accordingly, each organization's PR needs are unique, and a considerable amount of time and resources must be devoted to the building of a strategic communications program by the full-service PR team. This step can't be skipped before the time and work-intensive job of securing media relations results begins. It is precisely at this point that the performance-based agencies, which specialize in delivering these media relations results, can step in and lend a hand.

The Pay-for-Performance Model

A true pay-for-performance (also called pay-for-results) PR agency model offers some defining characteristics that separate the reputable resources from the less-than-capable. Here's my checklist of must-haves for a truly credible pay-for-performance resource:

- **Risk-free:** Reputable agencies only charge clients for results they deliver, so performance comes with a no-money-down and/or a money-back guarantee. They always include rates that are consistent and transparent. If a company does not offer this, they are not truly pay-for-performance.

- **Skill:** The behind-the-scenes agency staff is skilled and laser-focused on a single goal: targeting, finding, and capitalizing on top media opportunities. As a result, pay-for-performance agencies are usually more successful in driving consistent media coverage than full-service agencies—after all, their business model (and 100 percent of their revenue) depends on it.

- **As-needed:** For organizations that have clearly defined PR goals and handle many PR activities internally but lack the bandwidth needed to conduct impactful media relations, enlisting a pay-for-performance agency means they can concentrate on what they do best, and pull in media outreach help when it is needed. True pay-for-performance professionals understand that the service is an as-needed resource.

Things to Consider

There's a time when a media relations push is appropriate, but a client must be well positioned to support the expected coverage and the accompanying demand on time and resources. Also important, both parties need to be in agreement about what media will be targeted and have realistic expectations about the campaign's potential for success. Once again, this is where the full-service and pay-for-performance team members work well in partnership.

Clients shouldn't expect that a pay-for-performance PR model will save them money—it often won't. This is perhaps the best argument for keeping both strategic and media-driven agency resources on hand: The focus remains on the results, not the cost. That should be a good thing, as paying more means that the pay-for-performance agency has done its job in delivering media coverage.

My agency's process is to contact clients to confirm their buy-in once we have a sound opportunity, so there's no question later about whether they'll find it worthwhile coverage. If, however, the planned article or feature spot doesn't appear as anticipated (or if coverage doesn't meet clients' expectations) placement fees are reimbursed or waived. This way everyone's happily on the same page and there are no surprises. This also makes us a solid partner for agencies and internal departments, which typically need help and reliable resources, not unwelcome surprises. Before beginning a media relations campaign, we query clients and their agency resources to determine the background of their spokespersons, the ideal coverage they seek, and similar considerations that enable us to best partner with them.

Again, the needs of organizations are unique; requiring a reliance on strategy and tactics. That's why I welcome the co-existence of both public relations models. At the end of the day strategic and pay-for-performance PR models offer a rounded public relations program to meet the specific needs of any business, regardless of size or industry.

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