

# I can't afford a publicity/public relations campaign -- can I?

By Todd F. Brabender

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It's a phrase I hear over and over again from many entrepreneurs, small businesses owners and inventors: "I'd love to hire someone to launch our publicity campaign professionally, but we can't afford it, so I'm just going to have to do it on my own."

Over the past several months, I have been conducting an informal survey among entrepreneurs and business owners who have contacted me about my services. I have found that due to their lack of information or knowledge on the topic, many businesses typically over-estimate or over-budget the cost of a prospective public relations/publicity campaign. During my PR consultation with them, I asked: "How much do you think it will cost to launch a solid, effective PR/publicity campaign for your product/business?" Of the 102 people I've queried:

- 11% - Thought a professional PR campaign would cost \$10,000+ per month
- 32% - Thought a professional PR campaign would cost \$5,000-\$10,000 per month
- 39% - Thought a professional PR campaign would cost \$3,000-\$5,000 per month
- 12% - Thought a professional PR campaign would cost \$1,000-\$3,000 per month
- 6% - Thought a professional PR campaign would cost less than \$1,000 per month

The truth is -- you can get a publicity/PR campaign in all of those price ranges. What you get for your money and how effective the campaign will be is the real question? It is true that the more you pay the more you get. But getting the most publicity/PR exposure doesn't mean you have to get most expensive PR agency or specialist.

A good rule of thumb is to align yourself with a PR business that best reflects your business size. Most times their rates will be in line with your prospective PR budget. If you are a small business owner with two employees, you need not hire a high-dollar PR agency with dozens of employees. Find a PR business whose office size and capabilities closely resemble your business.

Case in point -- there is a large PR agency in a fancy building downtown a few miles from my office. Frankly, we are not even competition to each other - in fact we have even referred clients to each other. Why? They typically work with large corporations and implement campaigns of around \$10,000 per month. My business works with smaller businesses/individuals -- a PR/publicity campaign with my company would be about \$10,000 for an entire year - not just a month. Mechanically, the downtown firm and my business do the same thing when it comes to PR campaigns: professional media release composition; extensive media market research; articulate personalized distribution to the media; months of media relations (article placements/interview scheduling/media request fulfillment, clipping/tracking of media placements, etc.).

Signing up with the big firm doesn't mean you'll necessarily get an experienced associate working on your campaign. So are you getting what you are paying for? A friend of mine who works at a major PR firm gave me the following breakdown of billing fees in his office:

- Interns/Junior Executives - bill at \$75 / hour  
(Very little, if any professional experience)
- Account Executives - bill at \$100 - \$125 / hour  
(1-3 years of professional experience)
- Senior Account Executives - bill at \$125 - \$200 / hour  
(Multiple years of professional experience. Agency decision makers.)

Compare those prices to many small PR shops or individual PR specialists. Many have started their own PR businesses after years of experience in the industry and typically charge \$50 - \$100 per hour to professionally launch and maintain your campaign. Many times, you can get a seasoned PR veteran who will work directly with you and your staff for cheaper than the "Intern/Junior" executive rate at a downtown firm.

However, one word of advice -- when choosing a smaller firm or individual to do your PR, make sure they have the same tools that the bigger agencies do: updated media lists/contacts; personalized media distribution capabilities; professional clipping/tracking services to get copies of each of your media placements (articles, tapes from TV/radio shows) as well as the intangibles of expert communication/media relations skills and professional pitching prowess. If they are cheaper, but don't have all the tools to help you in the best manner possible, you are probably better off spending a little extra money to make sure your campaign is launched and maintained correctly.

The major benefits of hiring a professional (individual PR specialist or PR firm) to launch your campaign are:

- Proper Campaign Implementation - Improperly composed or poorly pitched campaigns are the major downfall of many PR efforts. Poorly written, over-commercialized media releases; uncalculated, misdirected mass e-mailing of the release pitch; no follow-up media relations/media request fulfillment; etc.. Your first impression to the media is a lasting one - make sure it's a good one.
- Media Contacts - Most PR agencies have established multiple media contacts

over several years that can lead to much better and more numerous media placements for your campaign. Let their foot in the door benefit you.

- Efficiency and Effectiveness - PR specialists/agencies generate publicity full time, 8-12 hours per day and know the ins and outs, shortcuts and secrets to getting the job done better and quicker. Sure you could hang your own drywall or do your own plumbing, but do you have the tools, the time and the expertise to make it cost effective. I always tell my clients, "You do what you do well, I'll do what I do well and we'll collectively move this business further up the ladder."

One caveat when it comes to choosing a professional PR agency or individual to work with - signing up for a higher priced campaign doesn't necessarily mean you will get better results than a cheaper campaign. And the inverse is true as well. Over the past year or so, many "low-cost PR/publicity services" have begun to pop up all over the Internet. Ones that promise to write and launch a press release for as low as \$99. They are low in cost - because frankly many are low in quality. Bigger is not necessarily better, and cheap does not always mean a good bargain.

If you have the time, tools and talent to launch and maintain your own campaign, you should definitely do so. If not - there are a number of public relations/publicity firms, specialists and services out there. Research to find the one whose services and fees match your business plan. Once business owners, entrepreneurs, and inventors learn more about their options when it comes to launching a PR campaign -- many find that they can't afford NOT to have one.

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