Is It Always PR's Job to Make the Phone Ring?

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Over the last several years, we've noticed a trend in client objectives moving away from building a brand towards driving sales, increasing contributions or gaining clicks. It's more about instant gratification than building a base for longer-term, positive growth. This is often referred to it as "making the phone ring." I recognize we live in a time where patience is no longer a virtue. We're in a time of quick-charging startups and billionaire aspirations before one hits 30. It's a time of instant pay-offs, not pay-outs.

But is it really the job of the PR professional to always make the phone ring? Is there still room for PR campaigns that slowly and steadily build awareness in the marketplace of products and ideas? Are businesses today in such a hurry to gain enough growth for funding and more growth to exercise their exit strategies, that they ignore even the possibility of building a brand reputation, let alone a legacy?

I can easily remember a time (not that long ago) when PR actually stood for "Performance Recognition," and PR firms, as well as individual publicists, were hired for their ability to build a client's reputation and recognition in the media. They became partners with their clients in developing an overall PR strategy that would resonate through the media with all the client's stakeholders – employees, investors and yes, potential customers – and evolve over time into a base of credible recognition.

Is this kind of PR still possible in today's instant

gratification world? Not unless we insist on it. Here are a few red-flag questions to consider the next time a new client demands that you make the phone ring.

Is the demand based on limited budget and funding?

Running a business demands a budget, and PR is not always major priority. Keeping the lights on and paying employees is the main priority. Does that mean that a PR firm or independent contractor doesn't also have bills to pay? Does it mean they have established levels of payment they've earned based on merit and experience? Those on the inside understand how many hours it takes to launch and maintain a successful campaign. And while a potential client may be crunching their numbers and wanting to get more for less, selling yourself short only impacts one side of the potential team. While there's always room to negotiate, and it's often on a case-by-case basis, setting a minimum fee and sticking to it is both good business and shows a client you have structure.

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Is the client far enough along in their evolution to be newsworthy?

As PR pros, we have often been informed by a client that they have "the greatest story that's never been told." Entrepreneurs who have the "next big thing" often feel that everyone will agree if only the media learns about it. What many don't understand is that our media colleagues have an inbox filled with "next big things."

This is when it's crucial to set realistic expectations with a prospective and explain that what they think, or even what we think, doesn't matter unless a reporter or producer thinks the

same. A wise strategy for clients new to PR is building a campaign from the ground up by going after the lower hanging fruit. Good reporters will always take that deeper dive into an organization before proceeding. If they see some media coverage, even if it's not top-tier, it shows that someone else thought they were worthy of coverage.

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Does the client understand the PR process and its dependency on the media?

Over my 50-year career, I've had hundreds of meetings with potential clients, so I need to take some time to explain how the process really works. Obviously, well-established companies understand the game a little better, but even they aren't always familiar with how the sausage gets made, so to speak. As PR pros, we have two entities to consider: our clients and our media colleagues. Our job is to serve both. Your best friend might write for the *Associated Press*, but there's no chance in they're going throw you a bone with a story unless it serves their needs, their editor's needs and their audience. What a client may want, while valid, doesn't necessarily coincide with what the media wants. Skillful publicists know that and can find the nuggets in a client's story that will resonate with the media, which is operating with a different set of goals.

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Is the client open to accepting a longer brand building approach?

I frequently see prospective clients who paint PR, advertising

and marketing with the same broad brush. Two of those have something in common. You pay, and you're guaranteed to receive. That's not PR. Earned media is a completely different animal and helps lay the groundwork for brand building. The story behind the story, created by a third party, resonates in a different way with audiences and helps develop a brand. Over time, with sustained maintenance, strategy and media visibility, brand loyalty can be the result. So, poking around to find out if a prospective client is in it for the quick hit or is seeking to establish something long-lasting, is necessary. If it's the former, then the conversation about the differences between advertising and PR needs to take place in advance so that everyone is on the same page.

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All of us in the profession understand that PR must provide an effective ROI. Ultimately, it's about creating visibility that will deliver a strong return. I've always felt that if someone is paying me $10 for my service, then my goal is for them to receive $11 in return. And while that might be attained through a slick ad campaign, when it comes to PR, the inherent value of the client's product or service and their brand perception is what will help make the phone ring today and down the road. Sometimes, we're communicating that inherent value instantly, but often, it takes place over time. That's not something that needs to be apologized for or dismissed.

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