

Sales & Marketing

Hotel Public Relations: Inside, Outside, or Inside-Out?

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There is one thing every hotel has in common: to satisfy the guest's request no matter how odd, peculiar or demanding. If you're a luxury hotel, the number of requests increase and their nature becomes even more complex. And they need to be fulfilled at the speed of light.

In the midst of daily operations - preparation for arrivals, room inspections, hosting private events, and countless other details - there is a small department that devotes its efforts solely in establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between the hotel and all its publics. The term "publics" generally refers to any group attempting to influence an organization, and within hospitality, examples of publics include of course guests, VIPs, unions, activists, government, community leaders, and employees only to name a few.

The public relations team leverages the hotel's mission and goals to reflect its interests to these publics and acts as a communications liaison. But the public that occupies a communication manager's time the most are the all-powerful, the invincible, the almighty Media.

Choosing the right people to tackle the mood changes of the press is crucial. Many hotels are torn between spending the extra thousands to hire agencies which outsource their professional services. Outside public relations agencies have an enormous advantage: for the most part they have experience within the industry and know influential people in it. They have established relationships and have worked with many editors in the past and therefore are more confident to leave voicemails knowing that they will get a call back. And they usually do.

In addition, agents are able to act as seasoned representatives for their client in events, fundraisers, networking parties, and participate in all the glitz and media glamour in order to get their message out to everyone. But, attending high-profile events will not necessarily get the hotel the publicity it needs. Agencies usually have all the tools necessary to create appropriate messages. Typically, they have a graphic designer on staff responsible for updating and maintaining the client's website, designing collateral material such as brochures, fliers, promotions and advertisements, among other things. Agencies are also experts in preparing General Managers and/or executives to handle reporters in public appearances, press conferences and other types of interviews.

But this elite service will cost you plenty, as most agencies work on a monthly retainer fee. Depending on the nature of the hotel, there are some months that are "dead" from a press perspective. For example, Boston is very slow from December through March which makes publicity during those months highly competitive. Agencies will still charge the retainer fee during those months, since they are reaching out to editors regardless of results, although agencies generally guarantee exposure to their clients over a certain period of time.

Question: What is the difference between having your own gourmet kitchen and going to a fine dining restaurant? Hmm... Along with price and service there is another variable to consider: You can prepare meals in the kitchen, the way you want, whenever you need to, and at any time. You're **flexible**. A similar philosophy applies to in-house public relations staff. More often than not, especially for small hotels, this is a more economical alternative. The on-site public relations professional works from an office in the hotel and manages media requests and pop-ups fast. While the agency handles multiple accounts, the in-house

person has only one focus, and therefore outreach can be far greater. Also, there is more time to develop editorial relationships like the ones the agency has, and focus on pitching various story ideas.

What's more, the in-house professional is always available to give walk-in press tours (agencies work with appointments only), therefore maximizing publicity potential. Since the on-site professional is a hotel employee they tend to know the property and its functions in greater detail than the agency will. This fact provides an additional advantage when exploring new editorial angles. For instance, there may be a special feature in a guestroom that maybe small, a VIP cat food amenity for instance, but significant enough to capture an editor's attention. And this leads to yet another fact: simply because a relationship is established doesn't always guarantee placement in an issue. The pitch is definitely essential, but it is the quality and timing that need to match the outlet's editorial focus and audience. Some publications take a different approach and ask you to spend thousands to advertise, and then, maybe, they will write a small blurb to give you the third party endorsement you were looking for in the first place.

However, the image, reputation, and the foundation of all hotel relationships lie in the formulation of one key factor: **the message**. What are you telling the media that is newsworthy, and why should they want to talk about your hotel in the first place? What makes your establishment unique than the one down the street? These questions will be answered differently when you ask an agency, who is specialized, and a hotel employee who manages public relations on-site. Their main difference is in method of approach, strategy and tactics. And the tricky part is that both approaches may be equally effective from different point of view.

Furthermore, the on-site manager most likely lacks the printing, design and web tools and has to work with freelance designers and printing houses to get the message properly planned and executed. Although this situation is not ideal, and takes a great deal of coordination, it saves the hotel a lot of money, and gains from the fact that there is someone on staff available should media-related episodes arise. And, boy, do they ever...

If anything, a communications plan is non-existent without a clear and concise **crisis plan**. How does the hotel respond when a story is leaked? How is executive management handling the crisis? Is there a complete statement drafted? Have you prepared a list of media outlets that need to be contacted first? Who is the point of contact for updated information? What tools will be used, and how will they prove to be effective to contain the media? And, remember, *never* say "No Comment!"

These are only a few questions to ask when outlining a crisis plan.

The agency is experienced to writing these types of strategy plans, although some may lack the inclusion of internal response during a crisis, for example, "How will the employees be notified? What will they be allowed to discuss?" Regardless, agencies can be beneficial in pinpointing the right avenues to take during a media response. They may have a better edge in identifying speaker opportunities, and may be more effective in leveraging the media during a crisis. Meanwhile, for an on-site manager, this amount of responsibility may become overwhelming in spite of how well-prepared and proactive they may be.

Puzzled? Here are some factors to consider before hiring an in-house professional or choosing to outsource:

- **Size.** The smaller the property, the more branding and relationship-building it requires. You should evaluate if you need someone who is willing to take the project on-site, and put forth 100% effort, or if you should trust your property into the hands of an experienced agency who will agree to convey the image the you are looking for, and not simply have you follow blind advice.
- **Time and Money.** When it comes down to it, there are other departments you need to need to worry about, too. Cutting costs is essential but maintaining quality is always the challenge. Find a balanced solution that will not set back your outreach efforts, but not exaggerate them either.
- **Quality of People.** Per our earlier analogy, investing in a gourmet kitchen versus always going to a fine dining restaurant certainly has advantages. The opposite is true as well. You may strike gold with a capable on-site person to handle public relations effectively, or you may waste money on agencies that have no time for you. Searching for the right people is imperative and directly affects your bottom line.

- **Inside-Out: a Balanced Approach.** Even with all this advice, some properties may still find themselves caught in the middle. In many cases, it is healthy to have a strong in-house presence that directs all public relations, and simultaneously have an agency on a project-based fee, “on call,” to supplement outreach efforts, issues and crisis management, and assist with those frustrating editors who won’t return those calls or respond to emails. Over time, you might find one or the other to be more cost-effective and choose the best alternative.

Finally, it is essential to recognize the importance of this specialized group of professionals whose success lies in making everyone else look good, and thrive by working in the background. All else cast aside, these are the people who have experienced and appreciate the unparalleled feeling of earning positive publicity for their organizations, and smile when their executive’s name makes it in print or on TV... knowing that their own name will not be in the credits.

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