

Business Trends: Why Organizations Seeking PR Support Are Turning to Independent Practitioners

For any business or organization seeking public relations support, finding the right PR partner is one of the most important decisions you can make. It's common to draw up a list of PR agencies you want to consider, based on past experience, recommendations or lists of firms in your area.

While many businesses and organizations tap the “big name” firms, believing they can provide the level of service and expertise needed, there's growing recognition in the business, association, government and nonprofit communities that independent practitioners can provide everything the big firms offer – and more.

Today's “independents” are experienced public relations professionals who serve clients across a wide range of industries in both the public and private sectors. They provide a full spectrum of services, including strategic planning, media relations, issues management, internal communications, social media, collateral development, and even training and development seminars for organizations' in-house staff. “Indies” tend to be veteran practitioners and recognized industry leaders with years of experience as executives and high level managers in corporations, businesses, agencies, nonprofits, associations and government. They bring to their clients strong business acumen since they are themselves entrepreneurs.

According to a recent survey conducted by the Independent Public Relations Alliance (IPRA), IPRA members have more



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than 22 years of experience on average and nine years as independent practitioners. These veteran PR professionals are the A-list of area “indies,” with many serving national and Fortune 500 clients, sometimes collaborating to form virtual agencies.

Flexible Business Model

Clients who have hired independent practitioners, point to the many benefits of their services. Chief among these is the flexibility they bring to a project or campaign, whether large or small. If you are embarking on a comprehensive new campaign or needing an agency of record, “indies” often create account teams comprised of senior-level specialists who have all the talent and experience you need.

“Independent PR practitioners are often brought in to serve as an extension of staff.”

Robert Flood, CEO, Ping Tone Communications explains how this model benefited his company: “I chose a virtual PR agency to help me position my new telecommunications company. My ‘team leader’ quickly assembled an account team of PR professionals with various types of expertise to support my business goals. I got reliable guidance and effective counsel from a customized team of senior-level professionals. This model is perfectly suited for my needs.”

When the project is small or defined, such as the need to assist at an annual meeting or press conference, independent practitioners are often brought in to serve as an extension of staff.

The National Association of Mortgage Brokers used an independent PR pro for a short-term project to promote their credentialing program leading up to the national conference. With only a few months of lead time, the independent practitioner developed a highly visible and successful mini-campaign, “Are You NAMB-certified?”

“Agencies often hire ‘indies’ to support them when pitching new business or when they are short-handed.”

PR agencies and local independent PR pros aren’t always competitors. In fact, Washington area PR firms often hire “indies” as staff extenders for support when pitching new business, they are short-handed, or they have a project that requires special skills. One large agency hired an independent PR practitioner to develop a crisis communications plan for a large overseas corporation, which included a strategy to deploy social media and media relations tactics in the event the CEO was kidnapped or assassinated.

Senior-Level Service At Affordable Rates

Client organizations appreciate the affordability of working with an independent PR practitioner. Because they are not saddled with expensive overhead, independents can offer senior-level services at rates that are typically 40-60 percent less than rates charged by a medium- or large-size agency. Many clients find an experienced independent practitioner’s hourly rate to be on a par with a junior staffer’s billing rate at a big firm. It’s also common to save on direct expenses.

Customized, Responsive Service

Client organizations point to the high degree of personalized, senior-level service they’ve come to expect from independent practitioners. According to Hallie Kapner, former Director of Public Affairs at the Partnership for a Drug-free America, “The independent practitioner we hired quickly and seamlessly became an integral, highly valued member of our communications team. She went above and beyond, providing responsive client service, insightful recommendations and generating terrific media results.”

“... organizations point to the high degree of personalized, senior-level service that independents offer.”

Another benefit companies find in working with independent PR professionals is that there is virtually no turnover, as opposed to the common complaint clients have at big agencies with disruption and loss of momentum when account supervisors get promoted or leave the firm. With an independent practitioner, there is also no “bait and switch” with an account handed off to junior level staff once a new business contract is signed. The independent practitioner becomes a member of the team with an established, ongoing relationship with the client.

Having an independent practitioner who becomes a valued member of the team has been the experience of Shawn Conrad, CAE, executive director of the International

Parking Institute, which several years ago invited an independent practitioner to speak to its board and advisory council on the value of launching an industry-wide campaign to advance the parking profession. Today, the same independent practitioner manages their successful *Parking Matters*[®] campaign and serves as the association's "outsourced" communications director.

Annetta Cheek, PhD, chair of the board of directors of The Center for Plain Language, highlights the valuable services of the Center's independent practitioner for her nonprofit: "With no paid staff, our organization is run by a volunteer board. Our independent PR consultant not only exceeded our PR/communications goals, she helped us create a long-term strategy, added great value in launching our annual event, and ultimately helped position our organization as the resource for plain language."

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Independent public practitioners say the more creative, personal attention they give is one of the reasons why they are able to "win" accounts against a traditional agency. In fact, some independent left large agencies and their pressure to bill each hour specifically to better serve

fewer clients. Better service also means staying abreast of quickly changing technologies and social media. Many independents are known for their social media savvy.

"Many independents are known for their expertise in social media and have extensive experience applying social media tools."

Award-Winning Results

Given the strategic focus, service and value independent practitioners bring to their clients, it's no surprise that each year many "indies" best the big PR firms to win prestigious national and regional awards, including Silver and Bronze Anvils from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), and Thoth Awards for PR Excellence from the PRSA National Capital Chapter. But for independent practitioners, it's the day in, day out work they do for their many satisfied clients that validates the benefits of the independent practitioner business model.

For more information on independent public relations practitioners in the Washington, D.C., area, visit the website of the Independent Public Relations Alliance, a section of the National Capital Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America, at www.ipralliance.com. The site includes a directory of local "indies" by market sector and practice specialty.

