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Out of sight, but not out of mind

Craig McGuire - 5 Dec 2005 15:29

Clients no longer need firms to be near. They now prioritize expertise over geography to pick agencies. Craig McGuire finds out how to make such relationships work

The internet and other technologies have made it possible for PR professionals to remotely manage client relationships, but it takes more than IM and VoIP to deliver true PR TLC.

Any firm with web access and multiple regional offices can provide national and global coverage. However, it takes a special breed to serve faraway accounts with no local ground support.

Remotely managing a client is not that different from keeping a long-distance love flame flickering, says Caroline Tiger, author of *The Long-Distance Relationship Guide: Advice for the Geographically Challenged*, which offers some techniques applicable to business relationships.

Most important, Tiger advises finding ways to rekindle the magic that "close-distance" partners take for granted. For starters, bone up on your phone skills. "If you're more effective in person, that's too bad," Tiger says. "Figure out how to transfer that energy and fluidity into a phone conversation. It's the quality, not the quantity, of calls that matters." So if you're bad on the phone, prepare a list of points you want to cover before the call.

As anyone knows, e-mail conversations can sometimes fail to convey the right tone, and that's all the more critical when they constitute the bulk of your communications with a client.

"Don't fight over e-mail because it leads too easily to misunderstanding," Tiger says. She also notes that competition means that a firm must beware of local agencies making a play for the client's business.

"Negotiate some kind of exclusive, short-term contract to ensure that your client is not looking at other, more accessible PR firms," she says. "And make yourself the most desirable partner so that your client has no reason to stray."

Being an SAE at Edelman in Silicon Valley, yet managing a client halfway around the world in New Zealand, obviously has its challenges. To overcome these obstacles, Angela Costa recommends relying on multiple vehicles of communication, such as regular conference calls, instant messaging, daily e-mail updates, and weekly status reports.

Still, all those e-mails and IMs are useless if you're not accessible when they most need you.

"Time zone differences can be tricky," Costa says. "You need to be semi-available 24 hours a

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day. Not that you need to work 24 hours, but if there's an emergency and a client needs to reach you at 3am your time, they need to have your cell number, and you need to have it on."

So this kind of client-agency relationship is not for those who need the standard 9-to-5 life. Still agency folk should not be afraid to set boundaries, as long as they are willing to bend over backward from time to time.

When an agency is based in Sloatsburg, NY, a charming village nestled in the foothills of the Ramapo Mountains, almost 50 miles from Manhattan, chances are staffers will have to manage long-distance relationships.

For Cyrus Afzali, head of Astoria Communications, the key is setting expectations, finding out what kind of update schedule the client likes, what form it should take (e-mail, phone, etc.), and adhering to that.

"I work with an immigration law firm in Irvine, CA" Afzali says. "Most of the time, I operate without regular phone or in-person contact with this client. From the beginning, we discussed the issue and decided e-mail contact was the best way to go."

And setting expectations up front will help weed out the long-distance clients that actually turn out to want in-person contact.

"Some people want more hand-holding and have difficulty with this kind of arrangement, even if they knew it was going to be this way from the start," he says. "If this kind of situation continues, you should develop a strategy to handle it, such as sending updates detailing what initiatives you'll work on next."

Agency pros may be able to manage long-distance relationships on a daily basis, but they must make at least the occasional pilgrimage, says Debra Seifert, senior communications counsel at Portland, OR-based McClenahan Bruer Communications. Seifert manages Plainview, NY-based Aeroflex, which designs, develops, and manufactures microelectronic and test and measurement products, and has plants scattered across the US and the UK.

Seifert says account teams should make sure they have a chance to meet clients at the outset of any relationship. "It is important to meet these people when you can," Seifert says, suggesting trade shows as a convenient location to do so.

Seifert urges PR pros in similar situations to keep a status report current with action items, dates, and who is responsible.

Lastly, the firm's location may be its greatest asset, if promoted properly. Samantha Slavin has an agency in LA. As such, she can command the attention of out-of-town clients interested in cozying up to Tinseltown types.

For instance, she has been working with Pure Hapa skin care, a company based out of Hawaii and San Francisco that was looking for a firm that could reach out to celebrities and press.

"We communicate daily via e-mail and phone, and I provide weekly status reports to update the client on our day-to-day progress," Slavin says. "Since we began working together earlier this year, I've gotten Pure Hapa products into the hands of A-list stars like Teri Hatcher, Charlize Theron, and Cynthia Nixon."

Slavin has also included the products in events and gift bags surrounding the Emmy Awards and LA Fashion Week.

"I've definitely seen an increase in out-of-town clients, especially from companies who want to reach out to celebrities, TV shows, and films with their products," Slavin says. "Being based in LA, I can provide these services to companies based outside of Hollywood who don't normally have access to this type of opportunity."

But it need not be Hollywood. If an agency is interested in augmenting its client base with out-of-town clients, it should assess what local assets it has. Strong local relationships are a big selling point. So even though an agency may not be named the AOR, it might still be able to drum up steady campaign work.

Technique tips

Do work on your phone skills and use multiple forms of electronic communication

Do set expectations up front

Do make the occasional trip to get some face time

Don't fight or argue over e-mail. Use the phone to resolve issues

Don't expect to keep a 9-to-5 schedule with clients in multiple time zones

Don't be afraid to set boundaries, but be accommodating

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