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Working with corporate clients from unfamiliar industries

Craig McGuire - 28 Nov 2005 00:00

For many agencies, chances are they'll be presented with opportunities to work with businesses in markets they're not used to navigating. Craig McGuire finds best practices for playing in a new field

Unless your agency caters exclusively to a specific niche, chances are you may sometimes find yourself challenged to service clients in industries outside your comfort zone.

Rather than turn away new business or risk ruining what could be valuable long-term relationships, there are a few strategies that agencies can use to play in unfamiliar markets.

Reaction Marketing Group (RMG) generally works in the b-to-b technology space, but successfully fielded opportunities this year in such industries as moving and storage, cosmetics, chemicals, and home and garden.

"We find the main problem is that happy clients sometimes move on and don't stay in the same industry," says president Jeremy Porter. "They only want to work with you, regardless of the specialty that you have."

So when a client who had worked in IT services opened an equestrian facility with her husband, RMG got the call. The firm also picked up a new business opportunity when an application development client recommended RMG to her friend in the moving industry.

But Porter notes that agencies shouldn't rush into every opportunity.

"Sometimes there isn't a lot of new business activity and there is perfectly good money sitting on the table - that's the wrong way to approach client engagement," he says. "I think people that hire agencies develop a comfort level with people they've had success working with before. It makes sense from a relationship standpoint, but not from a business standpoint. This is the equivalent of saying, 'I like my dentist. Maybe he can do my laser eye surgery, too.'"

Porter notes that agencies must determine whether the potential client understands what the agency can deliver, can work within the typical fee structure, and has someone internally who can offer guidance.

"We can live with one of the categories being out of alignment, but more than one and we'll walk away from the opportunity," he says.

At Boulder, CO-based Metzger Associates, CEO John Metzger notes that it's important to foster collaboration across practices so that staffers become comfortable working on unfamiliar projects.

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"We have a 'news room' office environment in which PR pros talk and hear each other pitching trends that converge and cross industries from enterprise software to whiskey-soaked beef jerky," Metzger says. "We can quickly comprehend and package the innovation angle of any company's story. This is what journalists care about most, no matter if it's about a new software program, a healthcare company, or a new consumer product."

It's also important to recognize that different accounts require different levels of service.

BookPros Literary Publicists is a boutique agency based in Austin, TX, that specializes in launch campaigns for fiction and nonfiction books.

However, when a few unusual situations cropped up this past year - a computer game debut, a continuing- education seminar launch - they were not about to turn away the business. "Though our publicists know how to hawk books in vertical markets, we have limited experience with corporate clients launching other types of products that require a longer-term strategy," says Jennifer McAndrew, senior publicist at BookPros.

She advises agencies to first identify whether they have team members with prior knowledge of the industry. And she notes that staffing on the account, both in terms of numbers and experience levels, should reflect the scope of the work.

"Teams for our corporate clients include both a publicist and our publicity director, while our typical book campaigns only include a publicist and assistant publicist," McAndrew says. "[We] assign an editor to the account team for increased writing needs and adjust timelines to allow for longer campaign length."

BookPros, which typically launches books in three to four months, needed to consider that corporate client launch campaigns can take a minimum of six months. It also needed to factor in time spent building relationships with a new set of reporters.

"The advantages of such an approach are the potential for the agency to gain expertise and recognition in a new industry and increase PR service," McAndrew says.

What to ask before taking on new clients

Do they understand what you do and value/need it?

Do they have somebody on the inside that can work with you? (Not having a marketing manager is often a bad sign.)

Do they have the budget to afford your normal prices?

Is there chemistry?

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