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Rewarding a firm's service with more than a pat on the back

Craig McGuire - 12 Sep 2005 19:55

Companies that herald the good work of their agencies do more than just boost PR pros' egos. Such recognition also can serve as motivation to work harder and set a respectful tone.

Companies that take the time to recognize the exemplary contributions of the agencies they retain really motivate their PR partners. But perhaps more important, taking a closer look can help a company identify best practices it may want other agencies to emulate.

Based in Cupertino, CA, Symantec relies on more than 30 different PR firms worldwide to promote its IT security solutions. To recognize leaders of its PR pack, Symantec held its' first-ever PR Agency Star Awards last year.

"For a company like ours that deals with so many agencies, and different kinds of agencies, we wanted to achieve some level of parity in performance," says Colleen McKenna, Symantec's director of worldwide consumer PR. "We also sincerely wanted to recognize some of the great work being done."

Symantec's global internal PR team nominated agencies, including ABC Hill & Knowlton (Denmark), Apex Communications (Taiwan), Burson-Marsteller (Italy), Burson-Marsteller (Latin America), Connect Public Relations (US), Fleishman-Hillard (Spain), Maverick Public Relations (Canada), Newell PR (Hong Kong), Orange Ink (South Africa), and Pleon (France).

A vote was taken among the directors of Symantec's internal PR, and two winners were chosen: (small agency) Maverick Public Relations and (medium/large agency) Burson-Marsteller in Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Chile.

The winning agency benefited with publicity from Symantec through a press release written by the internal PR team and proactive pitching efforts.

"In the end, we want to make sure we are getting the best value for every dollar we spend on PR," McKenna says. "Often, I don't think companies take the time to [determine] which agencies they use are providing the most bang for the buck."

From an agency's perspective, such recognition can obviously be extremely gratifying.

For instance, Euro RSCG Magnet was recognized by client Lactaid with the Johnson & Johnson Bell-ringer Award, the company's highest internal honor for marketing excellence, in recognition of its Hispanic marketing efforts.

"Magnet was very excited to receive this award and surprised because the team was not informed beforehand," says Sandra Bernardo, associate VP, Latino practice, Euro RSCG

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Magnet. "We display the award prominently in our front lobby and reference it as one of the best awards the agency [overall] has ever received."

At the same time, an internal PR department can use recognition not only to pat an agency on the back, but also to validate its decision to use outside help for management.

For example, Chinese Laundry footwear's internal PR team presented to its CEO a PowerPoint detailing how Samantha Slaven's eponymous agency had increased the company's media hits and improved its reach into its target demographic.

"It absolutely makes me want to get even bigger and better results for Chinese Laundry moving forward," Slaven says. "It took away any impromptu feelings of, 'Am I doing a good job, and is everyone happy?' It took some of the pressure off. And when a client appreciates you, it always motivates you to work harder for them."

Undeniably, most PR agencies would lament that what they do for clients can be, at times, a somewhat thankless job.

"I imagine, in clients' minds, we do what we get paid for and that monthly check would be thanks enough," says Lynda Knott, president, Murphy Knott Public Relations. "So if a special thank you does come our way, it really, really means a lot. When we received a huge, gorgeous bouquet of flowers from a client when we got a five-minute placement for them on MSNBC, it blew us all away. It happened at the beginning of the relationship with them, which set the tone for a terrific and respectful ongoing working relationship."

Forget the flowers, the gift baskets, and the thank-you notes, says Barbara Goldberg, principal at O'Connell & Goldberg.

"By far, the best recognition program came from our client, Sprint PCS, which rewarded our team with a complimentary massage after a stressful media launch," Goldberg says. "But even better, we also received a free 3G handset - the very item we were introducing - which is still being used by our account supervisor who headed up the media efforts."

Agency recognition

Popular methods of agency recognition:

Awards for outstanding service from companies that use multiple agencies

Gifts like spa treatments or free products to mark the end of a particularly busy period

Internal presentations at the company, directed at top executives, formally recognizing an agency's contribution

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