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The Agency Business: Sustaining client relationships after primary contacts depart

Craig McGuire - 13 Dec 2004 00:00

With a variety of economic forces driving high corporate turnover, PR professionals must be prepared for what happens when their primary client contacts suddenly change.

"One of the greatest challenges in running a PR agency today is managing the fallout from corporate volatility," says Jennifer Prosek, partner in the New York-based agency Cubitt Jacobs & Prosek (CJ&P). "With all indications pointing to increasing volatility in 2005, you had better have a plan in place for when your primary contacts leave."

From a sudden termination to a department-wide layoff or budget cut, to a complete C-level shakeup, there are many reasons that might wipe out your primary contact with a client.

The key, as PR pros who have managed the aftermath of many an ouster will attest, is to already have contingency plans in place.

"The time to win this kind of battle occurs long before they actually leave," advises Peter Morrissey, president of Boston-based Morrissey & Co.

Build multilevel relationships, but be diplomatic and understand the dynamic of the reporting structure before proceeding, Morrissey counsels. If your contact perceives you are going over his or her head, you might not have to wait for them to leave for you to be shown the door.

Be inclusive, thorough, and active, and you'll be remembered, Morrissey adds. For instance, chances are various aspects of your communication programs and PR campaigns touch other areas of the client's business.

Reach out to leaders in those departments and start building the relationships that hopefully you will never have to fall back on.

"And get involved; be in a constant state of planning," Morrissey adds.

"The more embedded you are, the more compelling it will be to keep you around."

Don't take for granted that everyone wants you around. Be proactive in seeking out the right person to promote the services you've provided the client, says Stephen Jaffe. As chairman of the Beverly Hills-based crisis management/litigation services agency Jaffe & Co., he's no stranger to immediate evacuations.

As outside counsel for Koch Industries, Jaffe was left to fend for himself not once, but twice in

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the past few years.

In 2001, Koch reassigned its PR operations from its legal headquarters in Washington, DC, to its corporate headquarters in Wichita, KS, under a newly installed PR director. Jaffe found himself left out of the loop.

"I went directly to the CEO and clearly articulated the specific function I served, supported by documentation and exhibits," says Jaffe. "He was not even aware of the work I had been doing and was impressed with my performance enough to reassign me to the newly appointed PR director."

Earlier this year, though, the PR director with whom Jaffe had struck up a solid relationship made his exit.

"The PR director told me he was leaving, but he did not know who his replacement would be," Jaffe says. "Once again, I approached the senior executive with a package of material and was successful."

Jaffe also advises increasing your chances for retention by emphasizing the immediacy of the situation, especially if you are the designated contact and coordinator for certain programs.

Undeniably, the single largest reason for losing a longstanding account is a change in management. The incoming regime does not know you, so give them a reason to love you, says Prosek.

As outside counsel for Adecco Group, the staffing multinational giant, CJ&P has withstood many CEO swaps and management shuffles in the past few years, most recently in early 2004.

"We've survived because we built relationships with contacts in multiple offices in the US, the UK, and Switzerland," Prosek says. "This lets the next generation not only know what we've done, but what we're capable of doing."

That is, because no matter what you say or show them, they are much more interested in what you can do under their watch.

And lastly, just because he's leaving, doesn't mean you should forget him.

"We had one situation where the contact left, taking his staff with him," Morrissey says. "Not only did we build a successful relationship with the incoming executive, but we kept in contact with the others, which produced three new client relationships."

"It also helps if you're sincere, rather than opportunistic," Morrissey adds. "He was there for you when you needed him, so be there for him when he needs you the most."

Keys to keeping your clients

Build multilevel relationships, but understand the reporting structure

Be inclusive, thorough, and active

Get constantly involved in a state of planning

Don't take for granted that everyone wants you around

Be proactive in seeking out the right person to promote the services you've provided the client

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