

# Their master's voice

Good public relations is invaluable for publicising a brand or retailer's message. Lucia Cockroft looks at how to choose PR that will more than pay for itself

**F**or many smaller brands and retailers, paying for a professional PR is an unaffordable luxury. Yet recruiting an external or in-house public relations expert can do wonders for your profile, and the costs can easily be recouped.

Another option is to go it alone. With the right amount of leg-work and confidence, doing your own PR can be just as effective, and is perhaps the only viable option for smaller businesses.

But first a brand or retailer needs to know the first steps they should take before choosing a PR, as well as the value of having one and making sure that person works hard for their money.

A typical outlay of between £1,000 and £3,000 a month for a PR is a huge bite out of a smaller company's budget, especially when there is no guarantee of coverage.

One retailer going it alone is Pamela Schiffer, owner of the eponymous womenswear stores in London's Primrose Hill and Notting Hill. "Good PR is all about building up relationships with magazines. It's about picking up the phone and getting the brand name out there," she says.

One big issue for this size of business, Schiffer points out, is the fact that smaller brands and independents are not seen as sexy by the media. "It's very difficult for independents to get PR in terms of magazine coverage, and it tends to be that the glossies aren't interested in us."

If you do decide to go down the PR route, she adds, rely on word of mouth for finding a good company. "You want to base your success on a company that has had success in the past. They will always tell you there are no guarantees, but you still have to have confidence in them. Trust your instincts: will you get on with them? Does what they are doing with other brands have an affinity with your business?"

Vicki Day, owner of PR firm Pure Sauce, also stresses the importance of having a similar culture, and describes the value of good PR as immeasurable, as long as the brief is clear and expectations match. She says: "I only work with people who have the same passion as I do: you tend to live, sleep, eat and breathe your client."

Decide what kind of PR you want, she advises



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Vicki Day, Pure Sauce

– is it for a specific project, such as fundraising, or for selling your business, or placing product? An in-house PR usually covers all aspects, from product placement to pitching a press release to the media. As he or she serves one master, they often have a full grip on the business they are representing, but can struggle to increase its appeal to the media unless the brand is strong.

By contrast, external PRs have many clients and therefore have a wider appeal to the media, as well as broader contacts.

Once the PR is in place, make sure your company message is clear and realistic – Day says targets such as seven articles by such and such a date tend to be anything but.

"You should have a very clear and defined view of your business, what you want to achieve, and the strengths and weakness in the business. Be very clear in your expectations," she says. ▶

# PR: what the experts say

## THE RETAILER'S VIEW



**Tom Chapman is managing director at Matches, which has 12 stores in west and south-west London, employing 200 people**

"PR is an area we spend a lot of time on. It's incredibly important to us. We have worked with fashion PR firm Brower Lewis for about six years. They have three people working on our account and we also have three in-house PR people. The two parties work very closely as a team and meet once a week.

"On average we book out about 300 pieces of stock a week to relevant press. We deal with serious fashion players, women's glossies such as *Vogue*, *Grazia*, *Elle* and *Glamour*, and quality national dailies including *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and the *Financial Times*.

"What press you deal with depends on where you are; dealing with the nationals is difficult for regional retailers, as trends only translate in central London. Look at where your market is and how you can communicate with them.

"We found our PR by asking journalists for recommendations: which PR firms they value, and give them the right information in the right way.

"We then sat down and put together a shortlist of three companies. You have to say to them 'here are my expectations, what would you suggest beyond these?' An external PR is an opportunity to get another angle on your business.

"I don't find any of the traditional methods of measuring PR particularly relevant. We have a much more instinctive and strategic approach.

"We regularly evaluate the coverage generated to make sure we are in all the key publications, and the results can be judged by our reputation and profile within the fashion industry."

## THE CONSULTANT'S VIEW



**Roger Wade, ex-founder and owner of Boxfresh, now runs his own brand consultancy company called Brands Incorporated**

"In the case of Boxfresh we developed our own in-house PR, the rationale being that no one should know your brand better than yourself.

"If you can't afford to hire a press agency or bring in an experienced PR person, get hold of a *Fashion Monitor* address book and do it yourself. You need to create a look book each season and send it to what you think are the right magazines. Follow it up with phone calls and slowly build up relationships.

"But if you don't have the confidence to go out and get your own press, then use a PR agency. Go through the brand list in *Fashion Monitor* and pick brands you like and who have good PR.

"Set your budget and expectations. You have to be very defined about what kind of press you want - celebrity, magazines, music. Make sure the PR you are considering has background knowledge of your chosen market.

"To get any reasonable coverage, your spending will be between £1,000 and £2,000 a month.

"Ask what type of press-cutting service you will get and whether this includes, say, courier charges or show-room space for press days. Your PR should give you a regular report of all your press clippings. They can quantify the value of the clippings by comparing the equivalent advertising costs.

"It is also important to distinguish between good and poor press - the number of viewers reached, the title's kudos. You must develop a feel for what coverage is good for your business."

## THE PR'S VIEW



**Fiona Cunningham, senior account manager at Stephanie Churchill PR, works with companies including Matalan, Lyle & Scott and MaxMara**

"The big advantage of in-house PR is that you are the one who really knows your business. On the minus side, in-house PR tends to be reactive.

"External PRs are often more proactive and strategic; they offer the opportunity for cross-fertilisation with other clients. They are also more objective, so can select aspects of the company worth promoting. They also have access to press you might not be familiar with.

"Ask for recommendations from journalists and people you know, then come up with a hit list of three to five agencies to approach. Work out your target audience, your key messages, and any threats to PR that agencies should be aware of. Identify what issues need addressing, your strategic position and your weaknesses and decide how you want your campaigns to be evaluated. This could be based on targets of hits and mentions, or based on equivalent advertising costs.

"We work on weekly or monthly reports listing coverage hits and convert them into EACs (equivalent ad costs). We break it down into monthly, weekly, TV, regional titles, women's magazines etc.

"Remember that it takes at least six months to see results."