

Take Your Business to the Next Level

(A Talented Creative Agency and a Good PR Firm May Be All You Need)

Your business is what people see, hear and read about it; nothing more and nothing less. Yes, to your customers, you're about the experience they personally have with your products and services, but your growth will come from the great universe of **potential** customers and referral sources. To them, you're just one of two things: nonexistent or an impression.

Nonexistent doesn't get you any business. The people who don't know you exist at all can't call you and won't refer business to you.

But if your prior activities or efforts to create awareness bore fruit, you've made an impression on some people. You've placed (intentionally or serendipitously) in their minds an image or "feel" for who you are, what you offer and what you stand for. An image derived from their interpretation of their encounters with you, your logo, your story, your website, your storefront, etc. Is the impression people have of you one that will serve you well? Fuel your growth? Cause talented people to want to work for you or with you?

Every time you meet someone, hand out a business card, mail a letter, answer the phone or present yourself on the Web, people are judging you and your firm. They're deciding whether you're "really sharp" or just showing up. Of course, they don't really know because they have not worked with you before, but they'll use their impressions to decide whether they'll ever give you a try.

To be sure, image matters. In a world where image matters, Ryan Rex says you need to at least get the basics right:

1. Establish your unique brand message and brand identity
2. Get a good, professionally created logo and tag line
3. Develop a top-notch business card, stationery and website*
4. Constantly develop and execute strategies for building awareness

Does this seem like a lot? It's really not.

Yes, it will cost some money, but rest assured, it's an investment that will pay big dividends.

Public Relations (PR) Firm vs. Creative Agency

The work of a PR firm and creative agency overlap quite a bit, but the PR firm focuses more on getting your message out. The PR firm also will help you with crafting your brand and your message, but the heavy-duty branding work is done by the creative agency.

Is the impression people have of you one that will serve you well?

So look at it like this. The creative agency helps you define your brand, your logo, your look, your business cards, letterhead and website. The PR firm then helps you get your message out. So you get mentioned in the media, get articles written about you or your firm, design a competent direct mail campaign, or develop a smart trade show strategy.

Working with Creative Agencies and PR Firms

Here, quality definitely matters. To find the right firm for you, share what you think you want with people you respect.

Get their suggestions, then meet with some of the agencies they recommend. Ask for samples of their work and check references. Do you see passion? Do you see quality?

If you want the job done right, don't be afraid to spend a little extra money. You don't want to pinch pennies today and have to redo it all again in a few years.

Engaging a Creative Agency or PR Firm

Creative agencies and PR firms are paid in one of three ways: by the hour, by the project, or on a monthly retainer.

Hourly rates range from \$20 to \$250. You would be wise not to pay by the hour unless you know exactly what you want and are skilled at directing the agency or firm.

That's typically not you or me.

Project billing is appropriate for clearly defined projects that have a beginning and an end, e.g., \$8,000 for a website that has a set number of pages and a particular functionality.

Monthly retainers are fine but should not be open-ended. They should be similar to project-based jobs but with an understanding that you will pay for the project in regular monthly installments. Or, if the work is more open-ended, the agency should keep track of everything it does for you (i.e., the time it spends working for you and what it does). In this manner, the agency will simply "fill up the limit" each month.

Don't let fear of what people might think dissuade you from using the media as a powerful tool for creating awareness.

Is It Wrong to Pursue Publicity? Is It an Ego Thing?

A lot of people confuse publicity with ego. They think that if you cooperate in any way with the media and the result is a favorable story about you or your company, then you're on an ego trip. Is this true?

What about the need to spread awareness of your firm? Are you committed to building a successful business? Are you someone who helps others? Are you passionate about what you do and excited to spread the word? If so, then what you're doing is not about ego — it's about building a successful business.

To be sure, there are plenty of egomaniacs around, and you certainly could be one of them. So could I. But don't let fear of what people might think dissuade you from using the media as a powerful and often inexpensive tool for creating awareness.

PR and creative agencies aren't cheap. If you can't afford the help now, plan to make the investment at your earliest opportunity. It may be hard to see it as an investment because it uses no bricks and no mortar, but it will still play a major role in helping you build your business.

Note: Ryan Rex of Rex PR provided his expertise for this article. You can reach him at www.RexPR.com. □

* At a very basic level, your website does not have to be extensive, just very sharp-looking and provide what you do, what you stand for, how to contact you and maybe some testimonials.