

CIPR PRide Awards 2010

Thames & Chiltern region

Xchangeteam Freelancer of the Year – Category 22

Stuart Brooks – Blackbird Communications

Summary

Business objectives

With a particular focus on automotive and technology related sectors, Blackbird Communications was established in January 2009 to help organisations engage their audiences more effectively and credibly.

Blackbird wanted to bring a refreshing dose of realism and frankness to the communication process, advising clients to 'tell it like it is' and communicate honestly and clearly.

At a time when challenging economic conditions mean reduced budgets, Blackbird helps companies make the most of their resources with the objective of generating tangible return through creative and original PR activity.

The business plan reflects a lean model that is focused on minimal overheads. A home based business enables Blackbird to offer a highly competitive fee rate. The initial launch plan was kept simple and flexible with realistic objectives. The four primary objectives for Year 1, all achieved, were:

- To achieve a turnover of £50k
- To achieve retained earnings of at least £5k
- To secure three retainer clients
- To develop a website for the company

Business performance for each month is evaluated, allowing for effective planning, cost projection and future budgeting. Blackbird takes a sensible and pragmatic approach to business planning with clearly defined goals. This is also good for motivation.

An example of a particular campaign

Brayley Honda St Albans wanted to generate local awareness of its £250k refurbished showroom.

From the customer perspective, a car dealer making a sizeable investment in premises was not considered as particularly newsworthy and could indeed beg the question, "So that's what I'm paying for".

Instead, Blackbird encouraged the business to switch the focus to its investment in the community rather than the bricks and mortar. Brayley Honda is actively supporting Apprenticeships so it was decided that the news story should highlight this with a photo of the newest Apprentice officially opening the refurbished showroom.

This approach resulted in extensive local and motor trade press coverage and local radio exposure which included the company's key messages of employing local people and giving them the opportunity to develop their skills, as well as reaffirming the business's presence in the area by investing in its showroom despite the recession.

A list of outstanding achievements

- By the end of the first six months of trading, Blackbird Communications had secured five retained clients on rolling contracts of between one and three months notice. This exceeded the business plan target for Year 1.
- Delivery of a new brand and communications strategy from scratch for The Independent Windscreen Academy, which included design, website build and industry launch event within three months. (Example of literature enclosed).
- Positioning of Maria Charlton, IWA Director, as a finalist in the national "Women on their Way" Awards 2009, recognising female entrepreneurs in the UK.
- Positioning of Brayley Honda St Albans as runner-up in UK's Franchised Dealership of the Year 2010 Awards, from a total of 5,500 qualifying businesses.
- Introduction of a brand new corporate newsletter for S&B Automotive Academy, which has helped improve employer engagement and generated increased interest in Apprenticeship placements.
- An exponential increase in press coverage within the automotive sector for Bluecycle.

Evaluation of those achievements, including analysis of performance against budget

Fee income for the first financial year was £87,000 which was 74% ahead of target revenue of 50K for year one. The business was profitable with net retained earnings exceeding target.

A new website for Blackbird was launched within the first six months of trading and delivered on budget.

Blackbird has demonstrated a positive start to trading during a tough economic climate and delivered results which go beyond the targets set for the first year.

Marketing activity focused on digital exposure, based on search engine optimisation techniques. Time was invested in developing a profile on all appropriate free online directories, which has provided a cost-effective means of generating profile.

Articles on PR and tips on communicating have been posted on business networking websites to boost search engine rankings. Stuart Brooks has an active social media profile, which enables people to 'buy in' to Blackbird's philosophy and personality. Stuart Brooks networks regularly at events organised by 4 Networking, Business Scene Hertfordshire, Herts for Business, Drinks and Links and the St Albans Networking Co-operative.

As well as utilising the internet, a new business mailer was sent to a selection of individuals operating within the consultancy's target market. Letters were followed up, which reinforced the company's approach to controlled and personalised marketing, which was also measurable. This exercise also afforded some market research in regard of competitor activity. It resulted in a meeting with Brayley Honda in St Albans, now a client.

Client testimonials

"Since engaging Blackbird to look after our PR, we have seen a huge increase in client and media interest and have come to depend on Stuart for business advice far beyond the initial remit. Within the first few months of working with him, he'd delivered more than our previous agency had in two years."

Piers Wilson, Head of Market Development, Bluecycle

"We engaged Blackbird to launch IWA to the automotive glazing sector, including a complete rebrand, new website and the development of a PR and communications strategy. Stuart has done such a fantastic job and the exposure for IWA has been amazing. Blackbird has become an integral part of IWA's future."

Maria Charlton, Director, Independent Windscreen Academy

"We were approached by Blackbird after both our businesses were finalists in a local business awards event at a time when we were expanding quickly but weren't big enough to support a sales/marketing and PR head. Stuart invested time in fully understanding our business before formally proposing how he could help us take our PR to the next level. Stuart has helped us both practically, writing blogs and press releases and strategically, helping us to understand where best to invest limited time and resources. I would not hesitate to recommend him."

Neil Osmond, Operations Director, Earthware