

NORTH EAST

22. XCHANGETEAM FREELANCER OF THE YEAR AWARD

JULIAN CHRISTOPHER/ FOOTPRINT PUBLIC RELATIONS

BUSINESS OBJECTIVES

I set up Footprint Public Relations in 2007 on a very specific set of principles:

- build a controlled portfolio of high quality regional clients, providing them with access to a highly experienced, independent PR professional at fee levels greatly below those charged by major regional agencies
- meet clients' business/communications objectives through the development/execution of robust, creative PR strategies
- guarantee capacity exists to meet campaign promises, only taking on work that can be delivered without risking the quality of service given to existing clients
- build a successful business whilst maintaining the flexibility that having a young family demands

Over the first 21 months, I built up the high-quality portfolio of retained clients I had hoped for, with companies including Newcastle Building Society, property/energy firm The Banks Group and business investors NEL Fund Managers Ltd all buying into the Footprint business model.

For 2009/10, with the economic downturn already leading many firms in the corporate/commercial markets in which I specialise to cut/lose PR budgets, my main objectives became securing the client base/fee levels I had built up whilst demonstrating even more clearly the value of targeted communications.

Eighteen months on, it is very pleasing to report that I not only retained all my existing clients through the recession, but also:

- secured three new clients
- increased fee levels
- continued to meet/exceed campaign objectives
- encouraged clients to look at new communications techniques
- widened the areas in which I am involved with clients' overall marketing efforts.

CAMPAIGN EXAMPLE

During one of the organisation's most difficult trading periods, my work for Newcastle Building Society has played a central role in maintaining its strong regional reputation.

A comprehensive media relations programme sought to not only ensure that the rationale for the organisational changes taking place was properly communicated to/fully understood by key audiences, but to also highlight the wide range of positive stories that continued to emanate from within the Society.

Recommending and shaping a policy of openness with the media meant that they based their stories on fact, rather than speculation or misinformation, and that they were also open to giving senior Newcastle personnel a proper platform for explaining why often difficult and/or complicated events were unfolding as they were.

Simultaneously, I was able to cover a wide range of community/CSR initiatives, as well as demonstrating NBS's savings and investment expertise in many different product areas, something which was considered strategically important in getting maximum commercial returns from the PR campaign.

Significant coverage was also generated in the lead-up to the opening of NBS's new flagship branch in central Newcastle, coverage which helped to drive branch footfall and revenues over their initial targets.

The enclosed testimonials from NBS's chief executive and communications manager demonstrate the very positive impact they felt my work made in maintaining the Society's heartland reputation.

OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENTS

In a period where staying solvent would be viewed as an outstanding achievement for many firms, I have successfully maintained/enhanced a profitable client portfolio of which larger agencies would be proud.

Key achievements include:

- helping to successfully manage/maintain Newcastle Building Society's reputation during extremely difficult trading conditions
- maintaining NEL Fund Managers' high media profile during the run-up to a £125m fund management contract tender, and by doing so, playing a tangible role in their successful bid for a £20m contract
- ensuring that Banks Developments' views around often-controversial development proposals get a fair hearing, and that their significant contributions to communities in which they work gets deserved recognition
- converting an occasional, project-based client (insolvency trade body R3) into a retained client, and then suggesting various 'best practice' techniques that the central communications team adopted across its UK-wide network of regional agencies
- providing PR support for Business in the Community on a predominantly *pro bono* basis, with additional paid project work secured as well
- successfully promoting luxury north Yorkshire hotel, Crab Manor, as an aspirational destination venue in media across northern England
- contributing more to clients' wider marketing activities, including roles in brand and website development (www.nel.co.uk)

- moving clients towards making more/better use of social media, and helping them grasp the potential benefits of utilising channels such as YouTube and Twitter
- delivering lectures on different aspects of the PR industry to Northumbria University Media Department undergraduates, and giving two simultaneously-translated lectures to a delegation of Chinese journalists during a business visit hosted by the University
- providing mentoring support/advice to several fellow freelancers and smaller agency peers, and pointing them towards opportunities which weren't for me

EVALUATION OF ACHIEVEMENTS

In my opinion, delivering on your promises is the key facet for developing/maintaining secure, long-term client/agency relationships.

I have been able to meet and exceed the objectives set by all my clients, as the testimonials included in my supporting materials indicate, and have succeeded commercially as a result.

Coverage ROI has always significantly outperformed the industry-standard 3:1 or 4:1 ratios, with, for example, my work for Newcastle Building Society providing a monthly PR Value ROI average of around 1,300%, with Q1 2010 showing a 1,900% return.

In terms of performance against budget, service levels have been closely monitored and maintained against agreed targets, with overservicing kept to a minimum unless absolutely necessary (ie, for short term/crisis-related reasons).

Time has been invested where it was strategically important to get closer to either individual clients (ie, NBS chief executive in advance of major announcements) or projects, and where the client's work (ie Business in the Community) warranted a 'corporate contribution' to the task in hand.

Overall fee levels rose by six per cent year-on-year, and profitability levels have remained high/stable.

Perhaps most importantly, I have been able to deliver excellent work/results across my client portfolio whilst seeing far more of my young family than I would have if I was still working in a mainstream agency.

As this was one of the main reasons I starting working freelance in the first place, I would judge it alongside financial performance, client service and campaign results as a crucial measure of success.

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