



Category: Outstanding Small Public Relations Consultancy

Company: Aberfield Communications

A brief overview of business / team strategy:

We believe PR should be about influencing audience attitudes and behaviours rather than 'increasing awareness'. That's where our 'Positive Influence' positioning was born. It's our point of difference, and one we can evidence through results beyond media coverage.

Not until we have clear insight into the target audience do we develop strategies and creative plans that will positively influence their attitudes or behaviours. That creates truly measurable outcomes for clients.

We never use AVEs. Measurement is based on our contribution to clients' business objectives: sales, enquiries, referrals, improved customer sentiment etc. We use a range of evaluation tools but we also analyse the client's own data and conduct customer research.

We operate a flat structure, with just three job titles, and directors Phil Reed and Tim Downs are heavily involved in client strategies and delivery.

We've worked hard to promote our positioning (eg producing insight-led reports on the UK's most influential communicators and the most influential football sponsors) and have generated significant awareness of it regionally and nationally in PR, marketing and business media.

Everyone is encouraged to blog and use social media to promote their expertise/interests and the agency's positioning. This has contributed to a 146% increase in website traffic in the past year alone, and we've achieved Google page one rankings for 80% of our keywords.

A summary of commitment to CPD and professionalism:

Despite our size, we invest an average of £15,000 per year in CPD.

Our commitment includes various CIPR and PRCA courses, workshops and webinars, but we've also established our own training vehicle: the Aberfield Academy. The employee-run Academy has its own year-round timetable of seminars and workshops, covering a range of skills, PR issues/trends/developments and commercial understanding. It enables individuals to share their knowledge and expertise, and improve skills across the team.

We take that knowledge-sharing to others, whether through lecture slots with PR students or workshops with organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce. Later this year we plan to run sessions on influence and crisis communications as part of Leeds Business Week.

We have a strong relationship with Leeds Beckett University, with placements and internships for PR students, and have sponsored its Vice Chancellor's Enterprise Scholarship.

Everyone has monthly one-to-ones and an annual personal development plan.

A summary of recent outstanding achievements, including client list growth / retention:

In four years we've built a blue-chip client list that belies our size, including QHotels, First Direct, Deloitte, Northern Rail, NG Bailey, The Football Pools and the World Triathlon Series.

We have 94% client retention and have lost only one retained client since we started. Although we have a 45% success record in competitive pitches, the majority of our new business has come through recommendations and referrals.

Income grew by 47% in the past two years and profitability rose by 118%.

We've won, or been shortlisted for, 14 awards and our wins include Social Media Campaign of the Year at the PRide Awards in 2015 – ahead of several well-established social media specialists.

A consistent thread has been the judges' comments on the strength of our insight, research and evaluation – clear endorsement of our 'Positive Influence'.

A summary of a campaign you are particularly proud of, including details of the brief, objectives, strategy and tactics, outputs, outcomes, and budget:

Brief and objectives:

QHotels – the 2014-15 AA Hotel Group of the Year – appointed Aberfield to develop a campaign to influence conference and event (C&E) bookers and organisers, with a target to increase year-on-year C&E enquiries by 10%.

Strategy & tactics:

- We conducted in-depth research with people across the C&E industry, using the results to inform our strategy
- Our campaign focused on creating market insights to engage with our target audiences, including:
 - making QHotels the first hotel group to use EEG headsets to analyse brainwave activity of event organisers, speakers and delegates, creating news and feature opportunities and reaching 400,000 events professionals. One major events agency has incorporated the research into its own work

- creating a report on the wellbeing of events organisers, endorsed by the Events & Hospitality Association
- producing shareable content (eg guides, reports and infographics) to engage with C&E professionals on social media.

Outputs:

- More than 110 items of coverage, reaching 4.7m
- 60% of coverage included a QHotels' website link
- 606 shares on social media.

Outcomes:

- Sales enquiries rose 40%, versus target 10%
- The increase was worth a potential £5.5m (an ROI of 119:1)
- Traffic to QHotels' C&E pages increased 11%.

A brief statement on what makes you special as a public relations consultancy:

'Positive Influence' isn't a strapline. It drives our business objectives and how we operate on a daily basis. It's how we measure our value to clients, and how we develop new business.

Through it we've achieved a market position that surpasses many of our long-established and larger competitors.

Aberfield is also a great place to work, whether it's the additional benefits we provide (eg the annual bonus scheme, childcare vouchers, three days' additional paid leave at Christmas and birthdays as paid holiday), the commitment to training and development, the inclusive, collaborative culture (enhanced by the flat structure) or the company's strong values and clarity of purpose.