

Working with Recalcitrant Clients

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After 27 years of PR agency service, I find the recalcitrant client is still the hardest to handle. This is any organization that hires a PR agency to represent it then forgets the agency is there or ignores the agency's entreaties for information.

There are many reasons why clients are recalcitrant. One is inexperience in how to work with a PR firm. Another is a lack of perceived value of PR itself. For example, lawyers may not see a need for media relations except in litigation support, or their definition of PR encompasses no more than writing brochures. One more reason is the nature of the client's work. Sometimes it is confidential, and the client feels it cannot trust information to an outside agency. Then too, there is a lack of understanding about how much PR firms need to know and how far agencies should bore into businesses to find stories to publicize or ideas to pursue. Whatever the reason, when an agency finds itself sitting on a sideline and doing little to advance a client's cause, it is in jeopardy. Clients ask PR agencies, "What have you done for me lately?"

Symptoms of recalcitrance

The earliest sign of recalcitrance is slow-motion response. One sends an action memo or e-mail to a client that needs immediate response, and the client gets around to it a week or more later. There is always a reason why reaction is delayed, but the agency misses opportunities in the interim and by time an action is approved, it is often late. A second symptom is unanswered phone calls and/or e-

mails. The agency dials the client three, four, five times and never gets through or hears back. Moreover the client does not bother to answer the six e-mails sent the client's way. Stalled paperwork is yet another sign. These are press releases circulated for weeks at a client without final approval or bylined articles that undergo constant revision without a final product. Canceled interviews are yet another telltale sign. When a client begins to disregard press requests for no good reason, the agency justifiably wonders why it was hired. A concomitant sign of client recalcitrance is falling client service time. If you are supposed to spend 40 hours a month on a client's work and you are stretching to make 20 hours, then something bad has happened. Finally, -- and I think worst of all -- is when you hear back-channel comments about the client's unhappiness with you and/or the agency. These whispered words have probably been shouted within the organization, but their effect is to surface hidden fears. Paranoia takes hold.

Confronting the Problem

Client recalcitrance calls for clarity and fact-finding. The first question should be, "Is it us, them or both sides?" Remaining objective when answering this question is difficult. There is frustration within the agency. Staff may feel aggrieved, and the temptation is to blame the other first. Start with expectations the client expressed from the beginning of the program, or before. What did the client say that the client wanted? Has the agency delivered? Was the agency ever given a

chance to deliver? Did the client express the wrong set of expectations?

We have experienced situations in which the head of public relations had an idea of what the agency should deliver, but the CEO was focused on something different. Since we reported to the PR department and were barred from working with the CEO, the process bogged. The CEO was unhappy and the PR department blamed us for failing to produce.

It is not always easy to understand where responsibility for recalcitrance lies or why it has happened. I have been in numerous sessions in which accounts were picked apart to determine why clients had grown cold or had never warmed up. There were as many opinions as participants, and conclusions were rarely clear. Sometimes, we could identify avenues for breaking barriers, but just as often we could not.

When this happens, it is best to review of the client's business goals and compare it to the agency's mission. Is it possible the agency has been sent down a wrong path? The client thought it cared about certain issues and goals but it never really did. Have environmental conditions changed at the client that call for changing the agency's mission? One way to clarify this is to ask what the CEO and top executives spend most of their time working on. If the agency is not working on topics directly related to what the CEO and top executives are thinking about, the agency's work may be irrelevant. If this is the case, it is likely that the agency should ignore the program sold to the client and focus on the client's agenda, whether or not the client asked the agency to do so. This may require rule breaking, but it should be done with care. Although the client might think that you are working on the plan, the agency should begin to show carefully in the areas of greatest client concern. It is the essence of sales and service: Find a need and fill it.

Over the years, I have been dismayed by how often internal PR departments are out of touch with CEO and top executive concerns. I have been upset as often by how often internal PR and marketing departments block access to top executives because it isn't in the departments' self-interest to give the agency exposure. Hence, corporate needs go unmet and recalcitrance sets in. When that happens, the agency's best action is to go-around the PR department subtly and silently to find a position alongside the department but reporting to the CEO. If the CEO expresses satisfaction with the agency and a desire to work directly with it, the PR department has little choice but to go along, even if it tries to stop the agency in numerous and subtle ways.

Approaches to Breaking Through

The fastest approach to handling recalcitrance is to take the matter up with the client directly. Tell the client that service has bogged, that the agency cannot work and that the client is not getting the value for which it is paying. This is usually enough to get things started, but not always. If the client expresses surprise that the organization has been unwilling to work with the agency, there is a good chance that the client will break up the logjam. It is up to the agency to point to specific instances where the process has failed and to make sure the process is fixed. It is also the agency's job to keep communications lines open and to point out to the client when matters are slipping again.

When a client shows no interest in helping the agency break through recalcitrance, there are indirect ways of getting service done. These, however, require hard work, creativity and persistence. We have, for example, sold ideas independently to editors, then researched and written articles with minimal client input. We used resulting clips to merchandise back to the client what we could do for the client. We have seized opportunities as well to show what we can do if used properly. For example, one client failed to complete a technical white paper and was past deadline for delivering it to

its clients and prospects. We completed the white paper in three days and saved the client from embarrassment. We then went on to write several more technical papers that we used for media contacts and positioning the client. In both examples, we cut the client out of the process in order to produce useful information quickly. We have learned that clients are often thankful to be left out because the burden of their own client service is so great that they have no time to write.

What had caused client recalcitrance in both examples was ignorance. The clients did not know an agency provided writing assistance and also did not believe an agency knew enough about the topics to write authoritatively. The agency had to prove itself and to act when the opportunity arose.

This raises a serious issue for agencies in handling recalcitrance. One cannot stop learning a client's business even though the client is not helping. If the agency cannot get information directly from the client, it is up to the agency to find information indirectly as best it can. This calls for close reading of industry publications, extensive secondary research and keeping up with general business news that might apply to the industry, client or similar products and services. Sometimes this is enough to convince a client that the agency has something useful to offer beyond traditional PR services.

Results break through recalcitrance as well. If an agency is able to show progress in spite of the client's unwillingness to cooperate, it sometimes can spark interest within the client. We have found, for example, that one or two

individuals willing to work with the agency might be all that is needed to overcome recalcitrance. By getting these individuals before the media frequently and by writing articles and opinion pieces for them, we can sometimes raise the interest level of others as well as spark jealousy that breaks the ice. Working this way, however, takes time and requires sufficient protection until the client can be turned around. Sometimes an agency will not get the time.

If these approaches fail, one can hunt for new avenues like a study that requires minimal client participation but produces solid results that a client can understand and will use. We have had both success and failure in this approach. One study done for a major client grew over a period of years into definitive portrait of CEOs. Another study done for a law firm provided a key insight that resulted in a story in *The New York Times*, but the agency lost the client anyway.

Ultimately, there is no easy answer for handling clients that ignore agencies, but giving up is about the last thing that an agency can and should do. Yet, even here there are times when leaving the client before the client leaves you is the proper step to take. Although the agency loses revenue, it does keep its dignity, and it recognizes that client service has limits. Still with hard work, creativity and persistence, it is possible to serve recalcitrant clients and even turn them around.

Jim Horton founded, developed and runs www.online-pr.com, an online resource for PR practitioners.