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Getting the word out

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Marketing can buy you the back page of a magazine, and public relations can get you on the front cover.

It's an old industry saying, but it still rings true. And for small businesses, either page sounds pretty good. After all, once you've developed your product you need customers, and advertising or great press can deliver them to your door.

But you're probably going to need some help, in the form of a public relations and/or marketing agency.

Bud-wei-ser

So how do you go about selecting the marketing and PR companies that are right for you? You pretty much have three options, says Jenny Schmitt, president of Cloudspark and co-chair of the independent counselor's group of the Georgia chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. "Large agency, small agency or independent counselors," she says.

Many people are tempted by the glitz and glamour of big agencies. Often they offer an all-in-one shop – PR, marketing, Web services. Plus, when you think of advertising campaigns you've liked and remembered, the Budweiser Frogs may come to mind, and all of a sudden you're thinking the same agency could do that for your company. But beware, the big guns pitch your business are not going to be the same people working on your account, unless maybe you are Anheuser-Busch. Senior executives pitch the business and pass the small-budget accounts to the junior people.

Small businesses are better suited for small agencies and solo practitioners. "I work with all small businesses, and I usually recommend a company build their own team by outsourcing specialists from their industry," Schmitt says. You're better off to start with specialists and then grow into agencies or hire to meet your needs as you grow. Ask around in your network and find other small business owners who are happy with their PR and marketing people, and interview those folks. Also check out the [American Marketing Association](#) and the [Public Relations Society of America, Georgia Chapter](#) for local experts in your industry.

Make sure an interview is part of your selection process. Chemistry is important. "You should see face-to-face who you will be working with," says Randi Leader-Oakes, an Atlanta PR consultant. "Do they 'get' your product or industry and how you make money? Do you get a good feeling for who they are? Do they have the energy level you want to represent your product to the media and your potential customers?"

The Dough

Another reason small agencies are well-positioned for small businesses is the cost factor. Large agencies work with large budgets. "Some large agencies won't even look at you unless your budget is \$50,000 or \$100,000 per year," Schmitt says. Small agencies and independent contractors (many of whom have years of big agency experience but started their own practice) are more affordable.

There are several options for hiring PR and marketing people.

First, you can pay by the hour. This gets expensive (\$100 to \$350 and up per hour for large agencies; \$75 to \$150 per hour for small) and sort of prevents the real work from getting done. Most PR professionals will tell you it takes two to three months of work before your company's name starts buzzing around town.

You can pay on a project-by-project basis. You'll agree upon a set rate for a specific project, like a product launch. In that case, the fees would include all aspects of research and implementation, says Schmitt.

Or, you can pay a retainer fee for a set number of hours per month; a small agency might charge



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between \$1,500 and \$3,000 for 20 to 30 hours per month. Supplements to the contract can always be added as additional projects come up.

"We only work on retainer," says Shannon Benton, leader of new business development at Kleber & Assoc. "The work seems to be smoother with a retainer. You can set up billable hours or a project fee, but we can spend hours on a press release and not guarantee its success. There's more pressure for success with project-by-project."

Retainers may come with a six-month minimum, Leader-Oakes says, which works in favor of both the client and the agency. "The time of commitment is fair – results don't happen overnight. There is writing, research, development of message, media training, media direction and lists to create, depending on the company." Hanging in there for several months allows the investment of their time and your money to pay off.

Contracts can be renegotiated if after six months you'd like to shift to a lower amount of hours or work on a project-by-project basis. "Whether it's for budgetary reasons or needing a break to shift your business, that's understandable," Leader-Oakes says. "But ongoing PR and marketing is really best. You don't want to lose your momentum or foothold in the market."

When drafting contracts, be sure to specify exactly what's included in the fees – whether retainer, hourly or project – and what charges could be incurred in addition. For example, will they outsource any creative work? Postage fees? Travel costs to an event? There shouldn't be any surprises.

"It's an investment," Benton says. "It may be hard to make for a small company. You've got to brand yourself, and be out there in a competitive marketplace." But, after all, that's why PR and marketing experts exist: to bring the buzz to you. Once the phone starts ringing, Web inquiries increase or your sales rep has an easy time getting a foot in the door because of an article in the paper, you'll know PR and marketing is working.

It may be just a matter of time before you have your own talking frogs.

As a small business owner or manager, why did you decide to bring in an agency? Was it the right decision? Did you opt for a larger or smaller agency? Visit the [Catalyst Community Forums](#) to find out what other small business owners do about their marketing strategies.

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