

“Welcome. We’re thrilled to have you here. I hope you like coffee.”

These words, or something to their effect, have been shared with generations of practitioners beginning their careers at a **public relations** (PR) agency. While these individuals, the clients, and even the core skills needed to perform this work can be dynamic in nature, much of the agency experience is universal. Agencies can be a great place to build a career on the leading edge of the PR industry.

Agencies attract whip-smart, motivated individuals. They are often people who are not satisfied with punching a clock and performing work that is considered “good enough.” The archetypal agency individual is a driven multitasker, someone who wants to be involved in every part of a process. Smart leaders hire the grown-up version of the kid who did everyone else’s work on group projects in elementary school—and stayed up late to ensure that every last magazine cutout was glued correctly to the poster board.

PR agencies offer a path to responsibility for young practitioners. They provide both the opportunity for and responsibility of counseling clients. The bar for success may be high, but so are the possibilities—both personally and professionally.

Working with a team of these Type-A personalities can be challenging and stressful, but it can also be incredibly productive and rewarding. It has provided a nurturing, motivating, and positive place for many young PR professionals to learn and grow in their careers. Yet, without the right support structures or the necessary personal motivation, agency life can also leave many budding practitioners tired and burned out after only a short time. In order to increase the probability of success, individuals should approach agency life with an open mind in order to understand and appreciate the unique demands and rewards of the environment—and with the understanding that it isn’t for everyone.

Objectives

- Clarify the characteristics of agency public relations work as opposed to in-house work.
- Understand the difference between niche and full-service agencies.
- Define the practitioner roles within a public relations agency.
- Introduce the benefits and challenges of agency careers.



It's also critical to remember that not all agencies are created equal. There are big and small companies and well-established and brand-new firms as well as those that are well-run and those that are less so. Even within these categories, some agencies are the right fit for the right person at a certain time in their careers but not at others. The difference between the right firm and the wrong firm for you can be night and day, so it's critical to be aware of the characteristics that define them.

If these traits, environments, and opportunities speak to you, this text can provide a window into the world of balancing the agency- and client-focused work needed to succeed. Working with leading agency professionals and serving a variety of clients is engaging, invigorating, challenging and rewarding work . . . that is, if you enjoy working hard and learn to appreciate the value of strong coffee.

Work Environment

You wake up. You make yourself look presentable and check your calendar to see if you have any meetings with more buttoned-down clients that day. You check email. You check your media alerts. You scan your client's **social media** channels and notifications. If nothing caught fire overnight, you make your way in to the office. You email two clients about stories that went live that morning—thankfully both positive. If you have a moment to breathe, you make a list of eight tasks you should accomplish that day and star five of them that need to be done. You get started on one of the items but are quickly distracted when a partner at your firm lets you know that he needs your help for an urgent client proposal. This puts you behind in preparing for a client call that afternoon, but you're still able to distribute a press release and provide the competitor research results needed for the proposal. By the time you wrap up the client call, make some reporter follow-up calls, and take care of an unexpected—but positive—media inquiry requiring client outreach and compiling talking points as well as the draft of an internal agency report, you realize that you've accomplished an incredible amount of work, but only one-third of it was on your original to-do list!

They may not have federal government-level benefits, a Google-style cafeteria, or Wall Street bonuses, but PR agencies tend to be some of the more fun, engaging, and rewarding places to work in the marketing and communication field.

Tip

In-House Public Relations or Agency Life?

One key distinction to keep in mind between an in-house PR position and that of an agency job is the size, skill, and makeup of your department. At many small companies, the communication/marketing/PR department may only be one or two people. Even recent graduates can quickly find themselves as the top communicator within this type of organization. While this responsibility can also have its rewards, it may not offer the opportunities to learn from and work alongside top industry professionals. Additionally, in very large companies, the responsibility of communication is often so segmented that junior practitioners end up with a very narrow exposure and skill set. While the opportunities for advancement may be exceptional over the long term, seniority often plays a larger role in the advancement process.

Many PR agencies have earned a reputation for supporting a youthful office environment with many junior professionals, providing numerous opportunities for recent college graduates. In part, agencies attract young professionals because they are fast-paced, vibrant places to learn. They can also offer rapid advancement opportunities and the potential for increased responsibility early in a practitioner's career.

Of course, there is another side to those same opportunities: PR firms are inherently high-pressure, no-excuse environments. Agencies ask a lot from all members of a team. They tend to hire a significant number of recent graduates due to a heightened level of attrition. Many young professionals in this industry have very high expectations placed upon them by senior staff, and the training, credit, and compensation do not always match these expectations. That said, these high expectations are precisely why well-run agencies attract top talent.

Whatever the circumstances, the formula for success is usually straightforward: Work hard, show results for your clients, and support the agency team. At most firms, those who do this well are rewarded, and those who do not eventually look to move on. In an era of gold stars and participation trophies, this can be a rude awakening. Either way, working at a PR agency can be an intensely rewarding experience, especially knowing that the work one does is impactful, valued, and rewarded.



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PR agencies provide a multitude of experiences and opportunities for young professionals.

Long-term career success requires exposure to a variety of experiences and skills and the subsequent refinement of them. PR agencies can facilitate this process as well as, if not better than, any other type of organization due to the dynamic nature of the business.

Expectations

While every PR agency environment is unique due to the leadership, geography, client base, and a multitude of other factors, the following list highlights a few of the key expectations that all incoming practitioners would be well served to work toward. Think of these as adjectives that describe the ideal agency professional.

Effective

One of the most rewarding parts of agency life is working with a group of people who are singularly focused on execution by collectively working diligently toward their personal, agency, and client goals. It's not simply the volume of work and the amount of time it takes to complete that work; prioritization, focus, and delivering on expectations are all essential for company success. The most successful agency team members are equally effective at executing both internal and external projects and are conscientious in their work with both fellow agency peers and client partners.

Efficient

Agency professionals are expected to work hard and be efficient. The structure of an agency, built on the professional services model, means that clients are generally not paying *a la carte* for specific deliverables but for professional time to complete the desired services. To oversimplify, it means that the faster a junior team member can write a strong press release, the more valuable he or she is to the agency. That said, success is also determined by the results or outcomes of a specific project, rather than only the outputs,¹ as explained in the leading measurement guidelines described in the Barcelona Principles. Therefore, writing a press release that takes twice as long but gets picked up by three times as many media outlets is more valuable in the long run. Ultimately, it's about doing impactful work that fulfills a client's business **objectives**.

Empowered

Life in an agency world is all about finding solutions. Top agency leaders cultivate strong teams by giving them important responsibilities and empowering them to make decisions and work toward a goal. They allow their teams to make

¹Grupp, R. W. (2010, June 18). The Barcelona declaration of research principles. *Institute for public relations*. Retrieved August 2, 2015, from <http://www.instituteforpr.org/the-barcelona-declaration-of-research-principles/>

choices—and, occasionally, mistakes—as part of the learning process. By providing their team members with the responsibility to plan and execute increasingly larger swaths of client work, agency practitioners build skills and confidence while increasing the sense of personal ownership and investment. This means that individuals must be willing to take on the responsibility and burden of driving client campaigns forward to success.

Energized

Effective public relations does not happen by accident. While there is a significant amount of skill necessary in order to be successful in the field, drive, willpower, and energy are also essential to get the job done. In walking through the office door each morning, it's critical to carry with you the desire to do your best work and a positivity undaunted by the obstacles placed in your way. Confidence and energy are critical for any PR practitioner, but the agency professional requires more of both—whether it's to help convince a hesitating client that a thoughtful strategic approach is right for them or to get through a to-do list made extra-long by multiple client projects.

One of the more rewarding aspects of a well-run agency is that each of these traits is developed and cultivated during the life cycle and proper execution of **integrated marketing communication (IMC)** campaigns.

PR agencies value professionalism and personality, since the percentage of public, external-facing, or client-facing team members is generally higher than at most organizations. This means that one's ability to look, sound, and perform in a professional manner is critical from the first day of hire. To be an active and valuable participant in meetings, one needs to be prepared, flexible, confident, and able to think on one's feet.

None of these skills are developed overnight, but they are cultivated through observation of senior professionals in action; development of depth related to a client's businesses, objectives, and industries; and understanding the process of producing news and content.

Agency Structure

As noted previously, PR agencies come in all shapes and sizes—from boutique firms with 3 to 5 practitioners to massive organizations with multiple offices and hundreds of employees. Nearly all agencies are structured with a top-down (pyramid) hierarchy, with fewer senior executives at the top, vying for new business and setting strategy, and a larger number of junior practitioners executing much of the day-to-day work. Depending on the **scope** of the agency's efforts, there may be multiple departments for different practice areas. Except for the smallest firms, there is also a support team that handles much of the behind-the-scenes work of running the business.

Work environments can also be strikingly different from firm to firm. A local boutique firm in a small media market may have a relatively targeted and stable client base, a reasonable pace of work, and experience success through strong



Media relations involves working with a variety of media outlets on behalf of clients, including print, broadcast, and digital channels for consumer and industry audiences.

relationships with local reporters and editors. They offer organizations in their market an opportunity to better leverage local media channels and engage with the community for local events, political issues, and causes. These firms often handle a mix of business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) clients. **Media relations** account team members work on multiple accounts, and firm partners are heavily involved in the day-to-day execution of deliverables. Such firms can be great opportunities for practitioners to develop skill sets on how to build strong relationships with clients and interact with the media.

One potential downside of a smaller boutique firm is that the scope of work is often limited in comparison to a larger agency. There may not be as many significant opportunities for professional growth or to gain experience in different client industries. There is often less exposure to larger clients or diverse groups of reporters and editors. Smaller firms may be located in smaller markets; be younger, less mature companies; or be run by practitioners who restrict their clients based on size or geography. That said, by working on smaller accounts, team members may be exposed to more clients simultaneously. Entry-level professionals are more likely to be working with, and learning from, agency principals.

Larger firms, on the other hand, are generally located in major metropolitan areas and tend to have larger accounts, bigger client teams, and more senior practitioners. They are much more likely to have multiple offices in multiple markets and to have more layers separating the top and bottom of the firm's hierarchy. Partners are often not as involved in the day-to-day media and client outreach. A group relatively separate from account management may handle business development. With larger accounts, the team members and scope of work are often more specialized. The responsibilities for social media and media relations may be split not only between different individuals, but also even into different departments or different offices. These firms can offer greater opportunities for advancement to the highest levels of the industry; to work with the largest accounts; and to engage in major public relations, social media **community relations**, **crisis communication**, or media outreach campaigns.

At the same time, larger firms often expect significant commitment from their team members, requiring long hours and applying substantial pressure to succeed. For the right person, it can be a challenging and invigorating environment. For the wrong person, it can become a burden. The long hours and client demands can mean extended workdays, late-night events, and even missed personal/family functions.

Whether your preference is to experience life at a large agency or a small one, geography has become less of a determining factor in success with clients. More and more, technology is allowing PR firms to perform outreach and build media relationships far beyond traditional media market boundaries. Geography is simply less of a determining factor in agency/client relationships today than it has been historically. Positively for the industry as a whole, expertise and effectiveness are the most critical drivers.

Agency Roles and Job Titles

PR agencies can vary greatly in their use of job titles and the responsibilities that each title carries. That said, they usually maintain a hierarchy with more seasoned professionals defining direction through goals, objectives, and **strategies** for client accounts, while junior practitioners are often tasked with the execution of the **tactics** and tasks built into these plans.

The division of labor within the agency structure is also important in establishing a balance and organization for each function, including media relations, **marketing, advertising**, media monitoring and reporting, events management, digital/**search engine optimization (SEO)**, social media channel/community management, content creation/editorial, and client management. Often, members from different discipline-based teams are pulled together to create an effective, comprehensive client team based on the account requirements.

While even the largest firms tend to combine at least some of these tasks within a single role, others may be wholly organized by client rather than by discipline. In this model, each member of an account team may engage in media relations, marketing, social media, and website oversight for an individual client. The workload is based more on the knowledge of the industry, geographic market, or unique client needs rather than the skill set of each task in an integrated marketing communication approach.

Understanding that these differing approaches to organization within an agency environment can promote distinct workloads and work environments is an important point. What may seem like the right fit for certain individuals may not be for others. Researching the operational structure of a PR agency can be one of the most critical insights prior to applying for jobs at specific firms.

From entry level to management, here is a relatively standard sample hierarchy of job descriptions and the main differentiators for each position: interns, account assistants, account executives,² account directors, vice presidents, and partners.

²One potential point of confusion for those entering the industry and job searching is that many media companies, including newspapers, magazine, radio stations, and television stations, use similar *account executive* job titles on their ad sales teams. In this context—and unlike the majority of PR firms—these are pure sales jobs soliciting print, radio, or TV advertising, usually paid in large part on commission.

Intern

Many PR agencies rely heavily on interns for tasks such as **social media monitoring**, **media clipping**, and client reporting as well as key outreach efforts, including media list building and **research**, media pitching and follow up, drafting press releases, and other external-facing documents. While the experience, job tasks, and overall educational value can range dramatically from one firm to another, the nature of agencies today means that the work of interns, particularly in the content-hungry world of social media, is as critical as ever. While largely unpaid, PR firms often lean on interns to increase their efficiency in meeting the demands of simultaneously working with multiple clients.

The opportunities for interns can be seen as either a positive or a negative for those looking to enter the industry. The chance to do real, practical work has meant that PR interns, more than many other professions, reap great value from their early work experiences. After completing an agency internship, most students or recent graduates will have a clear sense of whether agency life is for them. The potential downsides may include, but are certainly not limited to, unreasonable expectations of the position, questionable legality³ of working without compensation, long hours, and not always having the full support and direction needed to succeed.⁴ Agencies must take the necessary steps to build a viable program with clear objectives and thorough preparation and training for interns.

Today, students often complete multiple internships, giving themselves valuable perspectives of agency and in-house PR opportunities as well as a variety of contacts and connections in the field upon graduation. For those seeking internships, ensure that you ask questions about the work environment, the expectations, the job duties, the clients, the industry, the pace, and the responsibilities of the position. Identifying an internship opportunity that truly fits your appetite and your career goals is the best first step to having a positive PR agency experience.

Account Assistant

Recent graduates are often hired to be account assistants, focusing on client, issue, and media research; drafting and coordinating distribution of basic account and agency news; and ensuring that all media coverage on a specific client is fully captured, catalogued, and reported.

These positions may or may not be client facing but they do command a significant amount of responsibility. While the tasks that they perform may not be glamorous, they are vital to the agency's function and success. Through constant monitoring of a variety of news channels, account assistants are presented with an opportunity for firsthand involvement in understanding and decoding media trends to understand the most appropriate timing for connecting client experts with reporters.

³Appelbaum, L. (2010, April 16). Making internships work (without breaking the law). *PRSA news*. Retrieved July 20, 2015, from <http://prsay.prsa.org/index.php/2010/04/16/making-internships-work-without-breaking-the-law/>

⁴Barber, M.D. (n.d.). Solo PR Pro. Retrieved March 5, 2018, from <http://soloprpro.com/pr-interns-or-assistants/>

Agencies that make good use of their account assistants start them researching and writing early and often, allowing them to develop a deeper understanding of individual accounts and relevant industries. In executing this work effectively, account assistants gain exposure to the objectives and strategies—not simply the tactics—involved in planning and executing client campaigns.

Diligent account assistants do their best to soak up all of the information around them, to manage their time efficiently, and to ask for more whenever they can. This could include tagging along to client meetings or events, being a part of proposal development teams for new business, or taking advantage of educational opportunities with their local Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) chapter. Most importantly, this role is about learning the approaches, the pace, and the effort that goes into developing valuable integrated campaigns and programs for clients.

Account Executive

Professionals leading the day-to-day account work are considered the heart of any agency. The account executive role demands that team members are self-sufficient and can manage the majority of account tasks and tactics. These individuals know when the best times are to contact reporters and how to prioritize work over the balance of a day for maximum efficiency and are developing the key client management skills that allow them to build trust. At this level within an agency, practitioners are finding their groove, focusing on perfecting specific skills (based on industry or discipline), and understanding the style and size of an agency that is best suited for them.

Key facets of their work on the media relations side include direct media outreach, collaborating to create strategic plans, and implementing campaigns. They are often tasked with training and overseeing the work of interns and account assistants as well as ensuring that client teams are prepared for internal and client-facing meetings. In this respect, account executives play a critical role in the definition and execution of the firm's values and client experience on a daily basis.

Account Director

The glue of a strong PR firm is the management at the account director level. This position involves the critical training of increasingly larger internal teams that are managing the more visible critical client accounts. They often oversee the creation, training, and execution of internal and client communication processes.

Account directors are the most visible day-to-day client contacts, ensuring that work is delivered to meet goals, objectives, and strategies within required timelines and quality standards. As such, they are able to build very strong relationships with their clients and the media, translating these relationships into more effective and efficient work over the long term.

In directing client teams and ensuring that deadlines are met, this critical position manages the enforcement of firm policies and procedures, which may include hiring, **onboarding**, and training processes as well as best practices for media outreach or social media strategy. Account directors often meet with junior

team members to mentor, answer questions, check progress, and provide feedback on their performance.

Vice President

The vice president–level roles in PR firms are often organized by function (media relations, social media, digital, **creativity**, etc.) or by practice area, often broken down by industry. In larger, multi-office firms, vice presidents often oversee specific geographic territories, large clients, or industry practice groups.

Their day-to-day work consists of a significant number of meetings (both internal and client facing) to define strategies for accounts and to ensure that each individual client team is executing them appropriately. This governance may come through a weekly meeting pulse, a series of reporting documents, or more informal methods. It often means that a vice president will step in to help during difficult circumstances or when a crisis emerges—making the work both challenging and rewarding.

At this level, their strategic contributions often extend to the agency itself, helping to define the direction of the firm. A vice president supports the partners in identifying new opportunities, networking to expand their exposure to potential clients, and building proposals and presentations for new business meetings. Vice presidents may be tasked with watching for and responding to requests for proposal (RFPs), formal documents that many organizations use to provide organizational background information for potential agency partners when soliciting proposals for their marketing and PR work.

The ability of these individuals to develop and maintain good relationships with the media and with current and potential clients takes on an even greater level of importance. As executives, they are often expected to hold leadership positions within local organizations—from their PRSA chapter to nonprofit organizations in the community. In this way, they demonstrate their leadership and organizational management skills both within the agency and beyond it.

Partner/Principal/Owner

Many boutique and regional PR firms are named for their founders and partners. These individuals are generally the owners and main stakeholders in the business and thus serve the dual role of overseeing the PR activities of the firm along with running the company. Many great practitioners have risen to the challenge and expanded their entrepreneurial skill set, while others have struggled; however, all have been forced to delegate and give up some degree of day-to-day responsibility in order to succeed.

The best PR agency leaders find ways to act as visionaries and teachers while simultaneously empowering their teams to tackle the vast majority of client work. These individuals must leverage and integrate their own strengths and skill sets, hard-earned media and client relationships, and exceptional media relations or social media skills as well as business acumen and insights. They also must nurture

these skills within the rest of the organization in order to support up-and-coming talent.

Individuals in these roles often lead the business development and strategy initiatives, helping to win new clients and set the tone for the work to be completed. In the best circumstances, this setup leverages their vision and experience while allowing others to hone their skills in executing the work under their tutelage. However, successful execution does involve a distinct balancing act. When this approach misfires, clients are left feeling that their initial outreach was a bait-and-switch or that they've been left in the hands of less-skilled professionals. The best leaders create a strong team, involve them deeply in all processes, and set expectations from the outset as to the role that a firm partner will play long-term in a client relationship.

The size and scope of any individual firm is largely determined by the owners' skill, drive, and ambition. This may include consistent growth in order to challenge the top firms in their city, state, or region or may simply focus on the development of stable relationships with a core set of clients, employees, and industries.

Of course, *stable* is always a relative term in an agency environment. The pace of change, evolution of news and journalism, and the cycles of outreach tools and team members at any firm create an environment that challenges the best leaders and practitioners. PR firm leaders are among the most talented business professionals—they are doers, they are builders, and they are entrepreneurs, representing the highest echelon of media relations and communication practitioners.

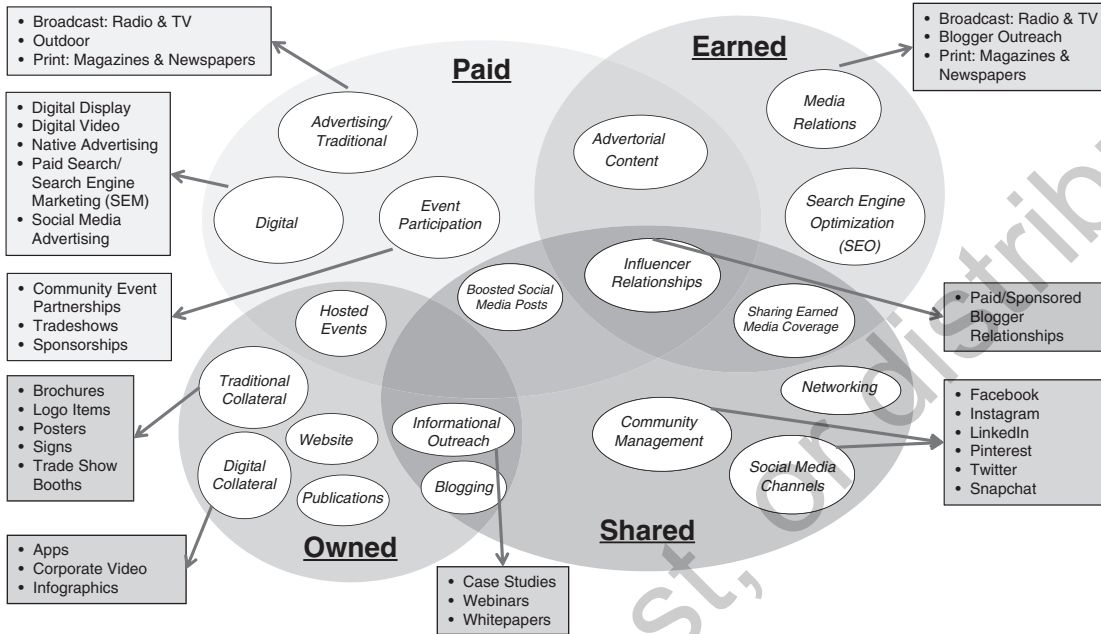
Additional and Alternative Job Titles

Agencies may also have further organization within specific disciplines, for example, their social media practice. This approach could produce job titles such as *media relations account executive* and *social media account executive*. Those firms that have a significant design or creative department often follow advertising agency naming conventions, including *creative director*, *graphic designer*, *developer*, *production coordinator*, and *copywriter*. Other agencies have adopted a movement toward unconventional titles, which can range in quality and value and from inspiring to nauseating. A 2014 *Forbes* article listed some of the best creative job titles, from *project meanie* (a project manager at InsightShare LLC) to *crayon evangelist* (the graphic design lead at InteQ Corp).⁵

There is also a move by many agencies to remove these layers of hierarchy and adopt a less stratified structure. This can mean more direct contact with agency partners and executives—a benefit for younger team members—but also more responsibility and less room for advancement. Whatever the result, smart agencies develop their structure based on their strengths and the best ways to serve their client base.

⁵Linkner, J. (2014, December 4). The 21 most creative job titles. *Forbes*. Retrieved September 14, 2015, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshlinkner/2014/12/04/the-21-most-creative-job-titles/#448c0a322933>

Figure 1.1 PESO: Paid, Earned, Shared, and Owned Media Channels



That said, the same job title can entail drastically different responsibilities from firm to firm. Before accepting any agency job, it's critical to fully understand the expectations for a certain role and where it fits into a firm's overall hierarchy.

The Impact of an Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) Approach

The flattening of many agency's job structures and the growing convergence of the public relations, advertising, social media, and digital marketing disciplines has made it increasingly difficult to separate out the functions of a traditional PR firm. This is reflected in the success of older firms with PR and marketing/advertising backgrounds that are now crossing over and doing fully integrated work as well as newer digital firms that are taking on increasingly larger slices of overall marketing **budgets**—and seeking opportunities to integrate **earned** and **paid media** into their own mix.

In addition to traditional media relations, many PR firms today incorporate tactics from marketing and advertising, creative design and production, web design, and SEO as well as social media from both a **content creation** and community management perspective.

In most cases, and for our industry as a whole, this is a vital and positive progression. The historical, and somewhat arbitrary, barriers between practitioners in

different areas of marketing communication are not relevant to a consumer, to a community, or to most business and organizational leaders. What should be most important is that the agency professional is making an impact toward a goal, not necessarily the tactic or tool that they have used to achieve it.

This approach does create challenges for PR agencies across the country and around the world. Very few agencies, and certainly no individual PR professional, is skilled in every facet of our increasingly complex communication networks.

Today's practitioners must have a firm grasp of broad strategies across disciplines and the self-awareness to understand their own limitations in terms of execution. With this approach, agency leaders can act as true counselors and put their client's needs ahead of their own skills. This means analyzing and diagnosing communication challenges based on the research and insights available, not necessarily based on the strengths of the individual practitioner or the firm. Practitioners may find themselves turning clients away or recommending supplementary services beyond their own reach. That said, by maintaining the role of strategist, public relations can remain at the center of the **messaging**, marketing, and outreach approaches that move an organization's business goals forward.

Agency Types: Niche Versus Full Service

Running any successful organization entails defining and understanding your limits. PR agencies are no exception. Understandably, there is significant variation as to how individual firms define these boundaries for themselves. Some agencies have a focus defined by geography or media market that leverages local media relationships, while other agencies offer a focus or core strength based on client industry expertise, such as health care, manufacturing, or tourism. They may also build a practice around types of PR outreach, such as product launches, crisis communication, **investor relations**, or community relations.

What separates a true niche agency from the others is how clearly they define these boundaries. When agencies build solid walls around a specific discipline or industry, they make themselves stand out from their competitors and appeal more strongly to a certain type of client.

Attributes of Niche Agencies

Many smaller, and sometimes even larger agencies, are very successful because they take the time to develop a specific area of expertise. Oftentimes, they will pursue only a single type of client and subsequently only hire PR practitioners that bring experience from within a specific industry or area of practice.

In order to provide the services desired by their clients, niche agencies often engage in more partnerships with outside experts or other firms to bolster their

efforts. This may entail relationships with graphic designers, web developers, advertising and marketing agencies, media buyers, social media practitioners, and media relations professionals with complementary geographic or industry expertise.

In general, a smaller agency tends to service smaller clients and run with a flatter organizational hierarchy. An organization such as this may employ a higher percentage of senior practitioners possessing specific expertise. For example, these firms may specialize in a discipline such as media relations, social media, crisis communication, investor relations, **government relations**, product launches, or **branding**. They may also serve specific types of clients, industries, or groups of industries (technology, real estate, sports, manufacturing, or nonprofit, for example). As noted previously, these organizations generally have a clearly defined set of operational boundaries that support their service offerings to the majority of their clients.

For the right clients, these firms execute their work extremely well and can be valuable training grounds for younger practitioners. For the wrong clients, these organizations can lead to problems of misdiagnosis and attempting to solve a given challenge with the wrong tool. For the wrong practitioner, or even the right practitioner at the wrong time in their career, the daily tasks can be overwhelming or overly limiting and repetitive.

Attributes of Full-Service Agencies

Many agencies self-identify as full-service or integrated. These firms support their clients with a much broader range of services than a boutique firm and often have much less clearly defined walls around the types of clients or industries they work with. Today, nearly all large firms are built around the full-service model. The main group of potential clients that they exclude by subscribing to this business model are small businesses or nonprofits that cannot afford their lowest retainers or clients that potentially pose a conflict of interest with current clients.

While most full-service agencies do take the time to set boundaries in terms of the facets of integrated marketing communication that they cover, these organizations face the challenge of clearly presenting themselves in order to attract a wide range of clients without overreaching their capabilities.

Even the largest PR agencies must address the question of when to outsource and when to bring certain skills in house. At minimum, agency staff will nearly always handle the work of strategic planning and media relations. Social media is generally offered in-house. Creative design, advertising, web development, and SEO are more likely to be outsourced. With increased convergence of these varied communication disciplines, PR firms have ever-increasing capabilities but also realize a growing burden of balancing what's right for the firm and best for the client base.

Reflect and Discuss

1. What pieces of the agency experience fit with your career goals?
2. What pieces of the agency experience fit with your personality?
3. What might give you pause about joining an agency?
4. What would make you excited to be a part of a PR agency?
5. Do you see yourself at a niche or full-service agency? Why?

Emily Bader



Emily Bader, an agency founder, leads planning at Zócalo Group. Emily guides client teams to develop social media programs founded in result-motivating insight. Her work includes guiding teams to uncover information

to motivate audiences; crystallizing the role of social media to achieve companies' goals; unlocking social voice, persona, and sharable stories; and creating engaging content strategies. Her experience spans industries and category challenges for consumer and corporate brands, including Johnson & Johnson, The Home Depot, Subway, Frito-Lay, and Unilever.

Prior to the birth of Zócalo Group, Emily spent ten years at Ketchum and finished her tenure there as the Midwest Director of the Food and Nutrition Practice. Prior to Ketchum, Emily grew through the ranks at Shandwick

in Minneapolis (pre-Weber). And she started her career at Kendrick Communications, a specialized consultancy focused on the automotive aftermarket. Emily serves on the board of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association and is a member of its ethics committee. We sat down with Emily to ask her what it is like to work at the Zócalo Group, and here's what she had to say.

How is your agency structured?

Our agency is set up more like an advertising agency than a PR agency; we have different groups.

- We have the account team; there are people who manage the business relationship, who oversee programming and try to identify new opportunities where we can help our clients. Within our account teams are community management; there are people dedicated to managing social media communities and ensuring that we are looking at engaging content and also

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managing engagement with consumers as well as identifying and flagging issues that come up. The account team is really the nucleus of client management.

- Our creative team is almost as big as our account team, and within the creative team, we have art directors and copywriters and a lot of people who are creating digital and social experiences to drive word of mouth. The account managers make sure the creative team has what they need and are well briefed to deliver upon the work we get.
- Strategy team is all about account planning and guides teams toward what the social insight is in order to develop compelling campaigns, social media posts, and content theories.
- There is also a research and analytics team, which conducts consumer research, studies, mining resources for consumer trends, etc.
- The digital media and technology team plans media buying and the tools we use to make the ideas stronger.

How many people are on the account teams?

It depends on the size of the client. We have some clients that are very lean and some that are very big. There can be as many as ten on an account team or as few as three. It depends on how much of a budget we have.

What job roles do you hire for?

We hire on all levels. We have two recent graduates: one who works in the research and analytics team, and another who joined our media team. We have people supporting creative and account teams in community management

on the account side. As our new generation becomes ever more social, it becomes incredibly valuable for us to hire young talent because it helps us make sure we're being true to what's social. Our creative team is always hiring young, fresh-out-of-college folks to help them on the creative side. There really is a full gamut of opportunity in an agency environment.

How would you describe your office environment?

It's very fun! We have scooters; even our CEO scoots around from office to office. We have the foosball table when we have beer Friday. Our creative teams do pranks with one another. For example, our product manager came in one day and his whole cube was wrapped in aluminum foil. Another guy walked in one morning and his entire office was filled with plastic volleyballs. There are tons of antics, but we do have a formal side and we have a formal conference room. We're in a high-rise building so our office right now is pretty standard. Most agencies are in an open plan where there are open desks and people sit looking at one another—we're going to be moving to that shortly.

What kind of a person should work in an agency setting like that?

If you're expecting to do the same thing every day, you shouldn't go into agency. There's always something that comes up, there's always a last-minute need to be met, there's always a client emergency, a client opportunity, or a new business pitch. You can never expect every day to be the same, so that kind of flexibility is important. I like to hire people who have been servers in restaurants. While there is a lot of

creativity and thinking and puzzles to be solved, we are in the service business and that means the customer is right. There's finessing to making sure that clients' expectations are exceeded and that we are able to respond to their different types of personalities. That takes having a service mind-set and a level of patience and understanding and really strong listening skills.

How would you suggest someone just starting out deal with that best?

Make sure that from the beginning that you understand it isn't personal and that it's business. As much as creative work becomes personal and you become invested in ideas and way of thinking, at the end of the day, an agency is a business. When clients are challenging, that's part of the business, and it's something you learn to overcome. It's important for someone starting out to not get deflated by crazy clients but to learn from and listen when they are challenging things.

How does someone highlight service experience on his or her resume? How do they illustrate that it is important?

Teamwork is important; there is a very strong element of teamwork that is very important in this world. There's often too much work for the time that you have and when teams get together and deal with that, that's what makes the work rewarding as a team. Highlight what skills have come up from that restaurant work in terms of client service: being recognized as being a strong customer service person but also the elements of team. What you're hiring is the person and the raw material that the person has and if you can get through a busy Saturday night shift, to me, that's a life skill that is very important.

Do you think our industry is moving toward an integrated environment?

Yes, and PR agencies that don't are going to fail. News media is very important and one piece of the puzzle. A PR agency needs to know how to interact with consumers as marketers, and work within digital environments, appreciate the power, and understand how paid media works, including the nuances of **native advertising** and engagements. There's a lot more blurring of lines in the industry, which makes things challenging for agencies. If you don't understand how the lines are blurring and you can't speak the language of cross disciplines, then it becomes even harder.

What does today's agency look like to you?

What companies are hiring for is having a defined expertise, but creativity has never been more important. The ability to have a specialty and to really define that specialty but to be fluent in all the disciplines around your focus is important. Everything is working together, particularly with social and digital.

Do you consider your agency a niche or full-service agency?

We do a lot of things. Our specialty really is social and digital work that drives word of mouth.

You have a very relaxed environment. When someone is coming in for an interview, how do you expect him or her to dress?

Dressy business casual. Long gone are the days where you have to wear a suit every day, so I think it's almost weird when someone comes in with a full suit.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Tell us about your mentorship program.

We have a mentorship program that extends the length of the time at the agency. Mentorship should

be something one asks for and people should seek that out. The employee needs to understand that part of their job is to learn the business.

Top 5 Characteristics Every PR Professional Should Have

1. **Pride and pleasure in making clients happy:** In an agency, the clients pay the bills. An agency's success is based on attaining clients and growing them. There is an art form to client service: truly understanding what they need, what their business meta-story is, and frankly, making them look good. Great agency people get jazzed by making clients happy.
2. **Love working in teams:** The best work comes from teamwork and so does the fastest work. Tight agency deadlines can be daunting—especially when clients seek big creative ideas and heavy strategies. It's important for teams to work together to ensure great work and service—breakthrough ideas, quality work, and consideration of all the details.

3. **Flexibility:** Every day is different in Agency Land and completely unpredictable. The happiest agency people go with the flow and can adjust nimbly.
4. **Insatiable curiosity:** There are so many businesses and clients and opportunities and disciplines and technologies to explore and discover in the world of agency. The more you embrace these learning opportunities, the easier it is to soar in your agency career.
5. **Thick skin:** As often as there are good, exciting days in this kind of environment, there are days where the clients don't like the work, when you don't win a new business pitch, or when someone else gets a new opportunity that you wanted—and more. The key is to never take any of this personally, to learn

from every not-so-fun experience, and to apply those learnings to the next experience.

Top Must-Knows

- The smaller the agency, the quicker you learn. When starting out, choose an agency that has a small but nimble team. You will get way more experience from a small agency than a big one. They will need you more and throw you into juicier assignments from the get-go versus supporting bigger teams.
- Don't ask? Don't get. Be proactive about experiences you want, positions to try, people to meet. Sometimes people in senior management posts aren't as proactive about giving junior professionals opportunities. So *you* need to be. The answer may be “no,” but you will get credit for asking.

- The agency business is a business. Agencies make money by ensuring their teams are *billable*. This means that every hour you spend is worth cold hard cash to the agency. Take that seriously, and appreciate that your time is valuable. Spend it as productively as you can. Always ask for more work if you don't feel like you have enough.

Top Must-Haves

- **Must-download app:** any of the many news-sharing apps. I like the good old-fashioned *New York Times*. It's critical in public relations and marketing that you stay current on the news and not just what interests you—the whole of what's going on around you in your city, the nation, in the world, and in the business world.
- **Must-read book/blog/news outlet:** Adweek or Ad Age. This is where the best marketers are featured, which provides incredible inspiration and competitive intelligence.
- **Must-use tool:** Newsmap. This helps you stay in real-time with what's happening in the world around you ([http://newsmap.jp/#/b, e, m, n, t, w/us/view/](http://newsmap.jp/#/b,e,m,n,t,w/us/view/)).

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