



APPROACHING PR AGENCIES

NPG Networking Event

November 19 2008

Outline:

- Survey conducted to learn from people making the hiring decisions
 - From sending out the cv to having the second interview to being in the job for the first year
 - Their gripes and frustrations
 - Their tips and suggestions
 - Hearing it from the front line

Survey Background:

- Agencies only – diverse range (all based in Sydney)
 - Small independent
 - Several medium sized independents
 - A multinational
 - Several national
 - All in operation for many years
 - Category expertise of participants is consumer/b2b/tech
- Participants are senior practitioners – MDs, GMs, GADs of different ages
- All questions asked in relation to “new practitioners” (meaning grads, juniors, people breaking into the industry)
- Presented verbatim

Question 1:

- ***What is more important, the cv or the covering letter (or both)?***
 - CV considered more important – should contain all the important details.
 - Cover letter gives an idea of personality (and should be tailored to the specific position)
 - Turn-offs are typos, casual language, informal salutation, slang, overselling themselves, overly confident
- **“I once received a cover letter half written in txt speak – I was horrified!”**

Key quotes:

- “I go straight to the cv – first the academic qualifications and then client experience, previous employers. I spend little time reviewing the cover letter – especially when there’s lots of cvs to review”
- “CV every time – set out what outcomes you have achieved – I don’t care if it’s KFC or a competitor – just assure me you are about achieving”
- “Cover letter should be tailored to the specific position whereas cv has all the important details”
- “I look for attention to detail and whether they are actually interested in the position we are offering”
- “Use the spell check and make sure you are set to Australian not US!”
- “I totally fall for a really strong cover letter and someone who is persistent with a follow up call but then has a really good phone manner”

Question 2:

- ***What stands out the most when viewing a cv?***
 - Everything! Work experience, results, hobbies, personality
 - How well they communicate via their cv – enthusiasm, interest, professionalism
 - Presentation and formatting (easy to read)
 - Not too long (no more than two pages)
 - Work experience especially noted – are they a hard worker?
 - Relevance
- **“Enthusiasm works for me every time and confidence – but not over confident!”**

Key quotes:

- “Work experience – are they a hard worker? Have they bothered to do work experience and get to know the industry?”
- “Definitely schooling/tertiary qualifications but also how well they can communicate via their cv”
- “Formatting and the ability to summarise their skills succinctly will really help a candidate to stand out”
- “Anything over two pages or even one for a junior candidate does not appeal”
- “I love reading the personal bits – hobbies etc. If people have made an effort with that then they tend to have a good personality which is also crucial for the world of PR”
- “Everything is important to me – grads shouldn’t underestimate the benefits of their work experience or hobbies”
- “Interpersonal skills jut out – how they present, how tenacious they appear, how I feel their personality would fit our culture, how well they have researched us and our clients”

Question 3:

- ***What is the best way to approach the agency?***
 - Any method is fine (post, email, website) as long as it's addressed correctly
 - Must know the name of the person – do not do generic approaches
 - Don't mind taking calls to help candidate get it right
 - Follow up with phone call (after sending in cv)
 - Don't underestimate the power of personal contact – email and web aren't always the way
- **“Invest some time in getting your dream job (we all want to think our agency is your dream job, not one of hundreds you are randomly trying!)”**

Key quotes:

- “Post or email is fine as long as the person has bothered to find out the name of the person responsible for recruitment and address their correspondence accordingly”
- “Knowing the name of the person to whom you are sending the cv is critical”
- “I don’t mind taking calls from people asking for the right person to send the cv to – I’d rather that than a generic email sent to the generic work address”
- “Bothering to find out our personal email addresses and emailing us directly using our names and then following up with a phone call”
- “Standing out is good here – cover letter is therefore critical” (*large multinational*)

Question 4:

- ***What can really put you off in the interview?***
 - Lack of research on company and clients
 - Over confidence or indifference
 - Presentation (overdressed or underdressed) – know your audience
 - Uncertainty about career direction
 - Presence (maturity and common sense)
 - Attitude
 - Lack of interest
 - No show and tell (work examples)
 - Arrogance (thinking they know everything)
- **“Can I imagine them in front of my most valued client?”**

Key quotes:

- “Not having done research on us or our clients, not projecting confidence, their presentation (not overdressed or underdressed), not having some decent questions to ask about us, our staff or our clients”
- “Lack of research about my company – why do they want to work for me? Are they keen to contribute? Do they display maturity and have a good head on their shoulders?”
- “Uncertainty about why they are in the room – ie why they are interested in pursuing a career in PR (it does happen!). It’s good to meet candidates with a clear direction on what they are looking for in their next role – even if it’s something as generic as ‘new challenges or new work environment.’”
- “I would encourage young practitioners to proactively discuss or bring in examples of work they have done...not a lot of people do it and it’s a great way to say ‘I want to make an impression.’”
- “Attitude is pretty much everything to me so anyone who reckons they know everything there is to know about PR is pretty off putting. As is someone who comes in and claims that because they have a degree (in comms), they should start at a higher level or salary than we know is reasonable. Come on, pretty much all of us have a degree and in addition, those who’ve worked for a few years know the importance of starting at the bottom and working up!”

Question 5:

- ***What point of difference are you looking for when viewing cvs at this level?***
 - Personality, commitment, enthusiasm
 - Accuracy, professionalism
 - Making an impression (cover letter, creative presentation)
 - Relevant work experience

- **“Hunger, fire in the belly, commitment and enthusiasm. I reckon you can demonstrate all of these in a CV – it’s about the words and the way it’s written”**

Key quotes:

- “That’s a hard one. However, they aren’t too difficult to cull if you start by rejecting those with spelling and grammatical errors, poor presentation etc. Again, the biggest difference probably comes from their cover letter which gives them the opportunity to reveal a little of their personalities (which is nice)”
- “Academic qualifications will help get you through the door but if they don’t stand out straight away or aren’t the strongest, I would encourage a candidate to be creative about how they present themselves...to show they understand PR and want to get your attention. If there are five candidates with PR credentials and two with hospitality credentials, those with the non-PR background need to try and make an impression”
- “Not much - its more in the meeting. I just like to see a keen person that has paid attention to detail, knows about my company and has some relevant work experience”
- “Hard to say – I guess it something that jumps out – believe it or not I look to see where they are living – hate hiring people who live on the central coast still or in whoop whoop – always means dramas later on”
- “Work experience definitely helps as does very good writing skills and a great, succinct cover letter”

Question 6:

- ***What point of difference are you looking for when interviewing someone at this level?***
 - Realism – having some idea of what is expected at this level (in attitude, work ethic and job outline)
 - Passion, enthusiasm
 - Demonstrate some idea of the media (be prepared to answer questions)
 - Demonstrate strength/passion for Web 2.0/social media
 - Well researched – company, clients
 - Enthusiasm, engagement and intelligent questions
- **“When you meet someone you want all your expectations confirmed. I think attitude takes you at least half the way and then good work ethic and quick learning the rest!”**

Key quotes:

- “Most people who start at grad level have to be prepared to do the hard yards in terms of publicity sell-ins and media liaison – so anyone that expresses a passion for this gets my vote!”
- “Similarly, demonstrating a passion for the media and knowing it really thoroughly – surprising how few people bother to do this. Come armed with some favourite journos, columnists etc. Anyone that demonstrated a strength/passion for web 2.0/social media and how this integrates with PR strategy would catch my eye at this point – as this is something us older PR folk are having to up skill on and we would hope/expect that younger practitioners should be aware of how important it is going to be to our PR offer”
- “Enthusiasm, intelligence, nice nature (not too Gen Y)”
- “Maturity - can I imagine them in front of my most valued client?”
- “Happy, smiling, energetic candidates who are not afraid to try new challenges and appear keen to develop their skills in PR. Having an understanding of the media is also critical but this is not something that candidates freely demonstrate and also often give disappointing answers when asked questions like ‘what papers or magazines do you regularly read?’ – they should definitely have an answer to this!”

Question 7:

- ***What are you looking for in a second i/v that is different to the first i/v?***
 - More research and questions
 - Show that you were listening in the first interview
 - Display excitement
 - More focus on skill set
 - Meet more of the team – confirm personality fit
- **“If they don’t appear excited about being there then it’s not very inspiring as the employer”**

Key quotes:

- “Second is more about the skill set (ie perhaps a writing test) and also to meet more of the team to check a personality fit with the team”
- “In a 2nd interview we give candidates a writing test but we’re also looking for enthusiasm/hunger for the role”
- “Pay attention to what you learned in the first interview and show me you were listening. Ask meaningful big picture questions about the role or the company direction. Don't ask me if you can take holidays or tell me you have a dental appointment booked”
- “Lots and lots of really good questions!”
- “The first interview is general background and are we the right fit for each other. The second is where I ask some tough scenario questions! Preparation will be to reflect on positive and negative experiences, highlights and lowlights”

Question 8:

- ***Would you always want them to undertake a writing test and, if yes, what is expected?***
 - Either a writing test or review work examples (depends on candidates level)
 - Not just a writing test but also a thinking test
 - Can they express themselves?
 - Can they think?
 - Can they work under pressure?
 - Also testing attitude
 - Don't panic!
- **“If they embrace it wholeheartedly and deliver the written piece back verbally with energy and enthusiasm then they can really stand out”**

Key quotes:

- “Yes mostly – or to bring good examples of their work. Speed, accuracy, ability to develop good angles”
- “Yes and a thinking test – to see if they can express themselves and if they can think”
- “Yes more and more these days. I am looking for the ability to work under pressure to produce a meaningful media release that pulls out the headline and makes sense. Give me your thinking, how you approached it and don't panic!”
- “Yes, I think it's a good idea at this stage – we look not only at their writing ability but also their attitude to taking on the test”
- “Not always – if you have examples of your work that helps. If you're a complete beginner then a good degree and work experience would probably suffice and its more about the attitude”

Question 9:

- ***What are you expecting to see in their attitude/work ethic vs natural skills/competencies vs qualifications/ degree?***
 - Attitude is key
 - Also confidence, energy and enthusiasm
 - Need to stand out as a communicator
 - Self awareness
 - Qualifications secondary
- **“Attitude is paramount - I can teach you everything else”**

Key quotes:

- "Attitude (hunger, enthusiasm), work ethic, skills, Uni qualifications, team fit"
- "Believe that any candidate interviewing for a role in PR needs to stand out as a communicator and should be able to sell themselves/their abilities confidently in an interview"
- "Confidence, energy and enthusiasm are key. If they then have the experience and qualifications to match they are 90% on the way to being offered the job"
- "Most importantly, they need to understand themselves, why they are there and why they want the role"
- "The former (attitude) every time! Qualifications mean nothing if you have a bad attitude"
- "The most important thing is attitude, communication aptitude, passion, culture fit – if they have that I will then check they have relevant quals, work experience. They need to be fairly gregarious without being over the top – if you're a confident communicator you will be easy to sell to our clients and also feel adept with dealing with challenging strangers like the media and other key influencers"

Question 10:

- ***What have been the biggest frustrations with employing young practitioners over the past 12 months?***
 - Lack of interest in current trends
 - Impatience
 - Unrealistic expectations (job, money, market)
 - Taking ownership and responsibility
 - Being proactive
 - Being prepared to do the hard yards (and then reaping the rewards)
- **“It’s about what they want and not what they will bring to us”**

Key quotes:

- “That they seem to demonstrate no interest/understanding of social media/web 2.0 which is one of the PR industry’s biggest growth opportunities. Perhaps that’s more the universities lack of training?”
- “1. They want everything now, 2. Want more money in first five months, 3. Sense of entitlement (not prepared to do the hard yards)”
- “Arrogant, overstating abilities, all about them”
- “Candidates who have yet to bridge the gap between school/uni speak and professional speak”
- “Once on board, young practitioners need to understand the importance of communication – ie speaking up when they don’t understand something or providing updates when they are behind on a task (rather than just hoping that no one will notice that the deadline has passed and never ask about that piece of work again)”
- “Proactive team members really stand out for me”
- “Probably having a lack of perspective in terms of their position and salary. You have to start somewhere and if you’re great, you’ll move up quickly”