

Go big, or go boutique? What to consider when appointing a PR agency

By [Maiyo Febi](#)

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The 90s sales slogan reads: "Go big or go home!" Does this kind of thinking still apply today? When it comes to appointing a public relations (PR) agency, have you ever considered going "home" might not be the worst-case scenario? Especially in an era where home translates to a personal touch...comfort...and special attention.



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Most executives fall into the "big is better!"-trap, but soon realise two things: big is not always better; and the difference (predominantly) is in the retainer amount the company pays the agency every month.

Does size matter?

But why does size matter? The answer will depend on a few factors. What is your campaign budget? What is the geographical scale of your brief? Are you/your product new to the market you are targeting? Are there many moving pieces that may require the brief to change often and quickly?

In the early days of PR, the late Edward Bernays (widely credited as the [father of PR](#)), trail blazed as a one-man-show skilled in the art of propaganda using [psychological techniques](#). Today PR has evolved into a well-respected industry, with hybrid agencies divided into specialised departments that focus on different sectors and communications disciplines. Concurrently, the rise of the boutique PR agency conversely focuses on a few sectors and select disciplines of PR and communications.

Big agencies mean big business

What are the benefits of going big? Besides the global reach and extensive manpower, a major plus is you will get access to a wide range of resources from different disciplines with a direct impact on PR and communications. The social media, marketing and PR teams could potentially all be hired from the same agency and produce work aligned to their approach. A cascading benefit is better working relations between teams – familiarity with people and processes means things get done quicker.

Big agencies often have offices in major cities around the world, so there are a fair amount of learnings and case studies within the business to help with refining specialist skills. Think PR giant, Edelman, with [over 65 offices](#) spread across the world in Canada, USA, Asia Pacific, South America, Europe, Middle East and Africa. Over and above the more traditional disciplines of PR and communications (employee communications, public affairs, media relations, etc.), the [company also has capabilities](#) in data security and privacy, B2B marketing, digital transformation and financial communications and capital markets, to name a few.

The global network of a big agency is unparalleled, not to mention the brand equity that comes with building a successful business over many years.

Less red tape, more flexibility – the beauty of the boutique agency

With boutique agencies, the level of dedication and care you get is exceptional; after all, the number of clients in their books are not as extensive as with big agencies. The smaller staff compliment in boutique agencies also result in more brainstorming as everyone contributes their creative ideas to the project.

When you work with a boutique agency, what you see is what you get. The team closing the deal and discussing the details of your account is likely to be the same team you work with for the duration of the partnership. This enables strong working relations. There is also the benefit of quick access to well-experienced senior executives in the agency.

Boutique PR agencies offer highly specialised expertise and focus on a few specific sectors like government and investor relations; fostering an intricate understanding of the nuances and dynamics associated with the sector. For instance, Fivestar PR based in Cape Town specialises in hospitality and luxury travel PR with a focus on strategic communications and publicity generation.

Nimble and flexible

Most likely, some of the individuals in boutique agencies have been employed in the sector they are now servicing. Their small staff count makes boutique agencies nimble and flexible, with quick turnaround on processes and approvals. If a PR plan needs to change, it can be done easily within the flat structure of the boutique agency – an important attribute in the rapidly shifting PR industry.

Less billable hours don't have to mean less results. When it comes to budget, boutique agencies tend to come in at a more affordable cost without compromising the quality of work; the knowledge and expertise, the insights or the contacts. As Gini Dietrich of Spinsucks.com puts it, "A small budget to a global firm is usually a gigantic budget to a boutique firm".

Appointing an agency that is a close fit will require a bit of ground work, however, it will be worth it in the long run. Rushing the process on the other hand can be costly, time-consuming and delay progress on key projects, so choose wisely.

ABOUT MAIYO FEBI

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