

PR Agency & Contractor Selection

by Joan Touchstone on behalf of IVP

This guide is intended to give you a jump start on resourcing your PR and communications function. Don't hesitate to reach out to [Joan Touchstone](#), [Amelia Gale](#), and/or [Blair Shane](#) if you have questions.

As a high-growth company, you have options when it comes to PR support, including bringing on a PR consultant, a PR agency, or a full-time in house communications hire. Your decision should be based on the scope of your needs, your timeline, and your budget.

Type of Support	Typical Cost	When to Consider
PR Consultant An individual to perform essential PR tasks for your business when you do not have an expert in house. This person can conduct comms audits and develop strategy, as well as plan and execute announcements.	\$8k-12k/month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When you have a discreet project (strategy, crisis, launch) or set of PR projects on the horizon, but do not have full time in house PR support or need an ongoing agency.
PR Agency A team of people from an established agency who provide creative thinking, planning and ongoing PR execution.	\$12-30k+/month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When you have a need for ongoing, monthly comms support with enough work for more than one person. When you have someone other than the founder, ideally a marketing and comms employee who can manage a team at an agency.
In-house Comms Hire An individual on your payroll who is fully dedicated to comms support. Comms can be handled by a Head of Marketing for a time but as you scale, you should have a dedicated Comms professional who reports to the CMO/VPM.	Varies depending on experience level. Consider hiring a Director/VP to start to guarantee strategic as well as doer capabilities. The IVP Talent Team can advise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When you feel there is a need for ongoing comms input and influence internally, the desire to do more proactive storytelling, and/or a lot of external interest in your company. When you foresee that you will have any large policy or crises that could arise in the next 12 months.

Agency Selection

When looking for a consultant or an agency, you are looking for three things:

1

A fit between the agency's experience and what your company does

2

A strong team who will support your business that you trust (the person/people you work with matters more than the brand name of the agency); and

3

A contract you feel comfortable with, in terms of cost, duration, deliverables, and ability to terminate if you're not satisfied.

How to Select an Agency

Step 1: Evaluate the options

Through your networks and research, find a list of 3-5 agencies/consultants who come highly recommended and have proven experience in your sector, your stage and the deliverable type (short and long-term).

Step 2: Reach out to the agencies and explain your needs

Set up an intro call with each agency/consultant. Be prepared to share your expectations, priorities and the overall business objectives you're focused on.

Step 3: Share company materials in advance

Send the team you'll be speaking with your company description, website, background on past PR efforts, and a summary of what you're looking for in an agency.

Step 4: Conduct an intro call or in-person meeting

You can expect them to pitch you on how they can help, but be prepared to pitch them as well. Agencies and consultants can be selective and are seeing incredibly high demand for their services. The great ones will dig into the stories, data, news or perspectives that you have that they can build into a powerful program to support your business goals.

Step 5: Review scopes and proposals

Ask each agency to draft a scope of work and proposal, including price, an outline of who will be working on the account, and timeline.

Step 6: Make a decision

Evaluate the agencies and consultants you've spoken with and select the one you feel the most confident in their ability to deliver. Remember to let the others know if you won't be moving forward with them. Selection Criteria includes:

- Confidence in the people who will be on your team (especially the account lead)
- The agency's understanding of your goals and
- A set of initial ideas that resonate with you
- Cost and time to manage for the outcomes that you are looking for.
- Speak to several current or former clients and dig into what works well, how they get the most out of the agency and what weaknesses they may have (no different than what you would do for an internal hire)

Step 7: Align on scope of work

With the agency team and your leads, agree upon the top 3-5 comms priorities aligned with strategic business objectives for the duration of the contract. They should know your topline OKRs and specific business objectives (e.g. related to hiring, retention, sales) to align their communications strategy. Sample metrics to target include:

- Number of articles/features/mentions
- Coverage in media you define as top tier/targets
- Number of press interviews
- Organic or PR-driven traffic
- Social mentions of company

Step 8: Begin work

Make sure to assign a point of contact internally who will be managing the relationship with the agency before kicking off. Agencies are only as good as the direction and information they receive.

Questions to Ask

When assessing an agency, you'll want to ask a variety of questions before deciding they are the team for you. Start with these to get a sense of how they work:

Experience and Expertise

- What is your experience working with companies in [X market]?
- Could you tell me about some of your clients and the results you've driven at our size and stage?
- Where do you have strong media relationships? Do you know people at *[outlets that are most important to you/your industry]*
- How are you adapting to today's changing media landscape? What have you done to get creative with other clients?

Structure of the Work

- How do you typically structure billing? Do you bill on a retainer, hourly, or project-based basis?
- What is your typical cost for a company of our size, based on the needs I've outlined?
- What team would I be working with? Who would lead the account and how many others would be working on it along with the lead?
- How do you define success with clients? How do you measure the impact of your work?
- Do you have a minimum timeframe? (e.g. 3 months, 6 months)
- When could you start work?

Tips to Remember

Provide ample lead time

If you have a specific date in mind to make an announcement or begin proactive communications, start your agency selection process well in advance. Announcements often take several months to plan and execute, and bringing on an agency too hurriedly can result in sub par results. It will typically take **three months** to select and onboard an agency.

Be wary of long contracts

Don't sign too long of a contract before the agency has proven itself. Start with a shorter contract (3 months) so you can change agencies if you need to (but have both feet in the boat expecting that you will want to work with them for years).

Get to know the team

Always confirm who you will be working with directly. Some agencies will trot out their superstars and switch the team once you sign a contract. To avoid this, make sure you meet the team servicing your account before signing a contract.

Agree on the specific deliverables and expected results

Agencies can never guarantee press coverage. Be wary of any agency that tells you they can.

Preferred PR Agencies and Contractors

This is an illustrative list of agencies we know and trust. We'll update this list from time to time.

Small to Medium Sized Agencies

[Six Eastern](#)

Focused on seed through Series C across B2B and B2C, across fintech/crypto, healthcare, enterprise software, dev tools, e-comm, and martech. Offers funding announcement sprints.

Contact

Emilie Gerber (CEO)
emilie@sixeastern.com

[Aircover](#)

Storytelling, crisis and strategic comms for early-to-mid-stage enterprise software companies. Excels in high profile media relations and providing senior (CEO) comms counsel.

Contact

Mike Moeller (CEO)
mike.moeller@aircoverpr.com

[Strange Brew Strategies](#)

Media relations and strategy for tech/innovation companies, often with complicated, regulated tech (robotics, aerospace, AI, enterprise). Focused on growing with companies from Series B and beyond; also have a dedicated startup program.

Contact

Dave Donahue (CEO)
dave@strangebrewstrategies.com

[BAM The Agency](#)

Comms for VC-backed startups, scrappy team and flexible with budgets, strong focus on DEI, works with companies from seed to IPO. Capabilities deck [here](#).

Contact

Beck Bamberger (CEO)
rebecca@bamtheagency.com
619.917.5109

[Inkhouse](#)

Thoughtful team with solid experience, good with data-driven storytelling, corporate reputation, and strategic planning. Works across B2B and B2C and better for later stage companies.

Contact

Jason Morris (President)
jason@inkhouse.com

[The Key](#)

Broad range of clients including consumer tech, health tech, real estate. Sharp team with deep experience.

Contact

Martha Shaunessey (Founder)
martha@thekeypr.com

Highwire

Specialize in B2B (including enterprise, security, SaaS). Strong content arm (writers/editors, social/digital).

Contact

Carol Carrubba
carol@highwirepr.com

Nectar PR

Great for B2B, with clients in enterprise, cloud, SaaS, transportation, logistics, AV, and more. Better for more mature companies.

Contact

Tracy Sjogreen
(Co-founder and Partner)
Tracy@nectarpr.com

Hunt & Gather

High-touch brand building, communications and special events. Good for executive positioning for larger companies looking to increase their influence and presence in the right circles.

Contact

Lily Greenwell-Farrell
lily@hunt-gather.com

Dotted Line Communications

Consumer, great with announcements (including funding) and strategic comms. Strong, scrappy media relations specialists.

Contact

Aimee Clark (Managing Partner)
aimee@dottedlinecomm.com

Larger Agencies

Archetype

Global agency focused on enterprise/b2b, fintech, deeptech and developer. Best for growth stage to post-IPO companies. Full service (earned media, social, digital and content creation). 750 employees with offices in US, Europe and APAC.

Contact

Helena Maus (CEO)
helena.maus@archetype.co

BerlinRosen

Integrated communications and public affairs shop, known for media relations, thought leadership, content/writing, design/digital and comms in highly regulated industries.

Contact

Jonathan Rosen (Principal)
jonathan@berlinrosen.com

Outcast

Media relations, thought leadership, corporate reputation + crisis, internal communications, financial communications.

Contacts

Amanda Duckworth (Head of Corporate Reputation)
aduckworth@thisisoutcast.com

[DKC](#)

Wide range of experience across many industries, including fintech, AI, healthcare, travel, and more. Strong consumer, pop culture, sports and culture practices.

Contact

Bill Orr (Executive Director)
bill_orr@dkcnews.com

Crisis/ Reputation/ Policy/ Public Affairs Agencies

[Kekst CNC](#)

Global firm representing financial services and tech, with roots in private equity. Strong policy, crisis comms, financial comms, corporate reputation practices with range from small (Series A) to large, global companies or investment firms. 12 offices across finance/business centers in Europe, Asia and the US.

Contacts

Oliver Mann, Partner, London
oliver.mann@kekstcnc.com
James Hartwell, Senior Consultant, London
james.hartwell@kekstcnc.com

[Milltown Partners](#)

Policy and regulatory comms, crisis comms, corporate reputation, financial comms. Great at working on thorny issues and international issues given their origins in Europe.

Contacts

Richard Appleton, Partner, SF
rappleton@milltownpartners.com
Ruth McAllister, Partner, NY
rmcallister@milltownpartners.com

[TrailRunner International](#)

Senior comms advisors for policy, crisis, investor relations and corporate communications. Strong financial comms, including IPO preparation, M&A, shareholder comms and restructuring.

Contact

Serena Saitto (MD)
serena.saitto@trailrunnerint.com

[Risa Heller Communications](#)

Top-notch crisis comms shop. Handles really difficult issues and will be on call for your company during a crisis.

Contact

Risa Heller
risa@risaheller.com

[Greenbrier Partners](#)

Crisis comms, public affairs, corporate comms.

Contact

Adrian Durbin
adrian@greenbrier.partners

Brunswick Group

Financial comms (IPO, M&A, shareholder activism), crisis comms, litigation comms, corporate reputation.

Contacts

Ash Spiegelberg

ASpiegelberg@brunswickgroup.com

Amy Koch

akoch@brunswickgroup.com

Independent Contractors

A typical rate for a contractor is \$8-12k a month. Some charge hourly, but most work on a retainer or project basis. They are in high demand, so you may have to reach out to a few before you get a 'yes' that they are interested in new clients.

Kat Eller Murray

Flexible consultant who works across stages and sectors. Also has a network of consultants specializing in technical writing, event management, social media, and more. Offers fractional comms leader services. Former Google and Fleishman-Hillard.

Contact

kat@roamcomms.com

Kim Angell

Best at consumer tech. Runs narrative and strategy sessions and can also help on execution and announcements.

Contact

kim.angell@gmail.com

Alex Hollander

Best with B2C clients. Creative and flexible consultant. Offers fractional comms leader services. Former Facebook/Instagram.

Contact

alex@alexhollander.me

Brian Baker

Crisis and public affairs. Former Brunswick. Works with clients of all sizes and has a flexible model for engagements.

Contact

Brian@BigSkyCrisisCommunications.com

Amber Rowland

B2B, SaaS, B2D. One of the few consultants focused on the developer space and has strong media connections for funding announcements. Former Head of Comms at VMWare.

Contact

amber@therowlandagency.com

[Annabel Riordan](#)

Corp comms consultant for startups and tech companies. Specializes in positioning, storytelling and crisis. Former Sequoia Capital and Facebook/Messenger.

Contact

annabelriordan@gmail.com

Fractional CCOs and Comms Advisors

These people provide high level comms advice and are more seasoned than the average consultant. They are there to provide hands-on support for announcements, but rather can come in to serve as an interim head of comms and provide high level, strategic thinking about your communications efforts.

[Brooke Hammerling \(The New New Thing\)](#)

Formerly the Founder of Brew PR. Very well connected and can provide high-level strategic support for companies looking to break out.

[Will Valentine \(Valentine Advisors\)](#)

Former head of communications for Pandora, Lyft. Expertise in taking companies public and can come in to lead a comms team in the absence of a leader.

Media Trainers

Media trainers can be immensely helpful for founders and any spokesperson for your company. You should bring them in when a) Your founder has an interview/panel/presentation coming up, or b) Your company is growing rapidly but the founder does not have much media experience and needs a media training 101 session. This will ensure you're prepared when media or other external opportunities arise.

[Marisa Thomas \(Pivotal Media\)](#)

Excellent at honing messaging, working on presentation style, and giving honest feedback to founders and spokespeople. Has worked with hundreds of high level tech execs. Former Clarity Media Group, now running her own firm.

Contact

marisa@pivotalmedia.xyz

[Bill McGowan \(Clarity Media Group\)](#)

Great for preparing for broadcast or high stakes presentations/interviews. Also has worked with hundreds of tech execs.

Contact

bill.mcgowan@claritymediagroup.com

[Tim Johnson \(APJ Consulting\)](#)

Speech/presence. Best to bring in before a specific speech or appearance.

Contact

Tim@apjconsult.com

In House Comms Hire

[Davey Nickels](#) and the IVP Talent Team will be a great resource as you are considering hiring. Please reach out to set up a meeting. [Joan Touchstone](#) and [Blair Shane](#) are also happy to interview finalists.

Communications Recruiters

- [KC Partners](#): [Brooke Kruger](#) Brooke@kc-partners.com
- [Rich Talent Group](#): [Nicole Reboe](#) and [Jana Rich](#) jrich@richtalentgroup.com
- [Jordan Partners/PLB Search](#): [Asheley Linnenbach](#) asheley@jordanpartnersllc.com or asheley@plbsearch.com
- [Ventura Finn](#): [Kathy Ventura](#) Kathy@venturafinn.com
- [Heyman Associates](#): [Jessamyn Katz](#) [jkatz@heymanassociates.com](mailto:jkat@heymanassociates.com)
- [Koller Search Partners](#): [Karen Danzinger](#) kdanziger@kollersearch.com

Interviewing Contractors, Fractional CCOs or Full time Comms

Key questions we encourage that you ask when interviewing a Communications/ PR hire include:

1. Why are you passionate about technology and [your industry?]
2. What do you think we are doing well, and what would you do to improve our communications efforts if we brought you on full time?
3. Where do you think the future of tech PR is going? What is the right balance between owned and earned media?
4. How do you approach media relationships? Where do you have them and what have you done to forge new ones in your prior roles?
5. In your past roles, have you worked directly with founders?
6. How do you measure success in a typical PR project/campaign?
7. You may want to consider an assignment for finalists. You should not ask them to put together a holistic PR plan for your company (this is seen as doing work for free), but you can ask them to do something like:
 - Develop a proactive plan to announce an upcoming funding round, with the challenge to get creative

- Develop a crisis plan for the company in the case of a data breach or other crisis
 - Develop a plan for an upcoming product announcement
8. What was the announcement or campaign you're most proud of in your career?
 9. What are your favorite parts of the comms role, and your least favorite?
 10. Do you thrive as a generalist, or do you like to be focused on what kind of comms?
 11. How will you measure your success in the role after 90 days? Six months? A year?
 12. What's most important to you when hiring/building/leading a team?
 13. What's the most challenging thing about PR/Communications that people outside of the function don't know or realize?

Reverse Pitch/What Their Role Will Be

The market for good comms leads is tight and good comms people are in high demand, so you will also need to sell the candidate on why they should join your company.

As you conduct the interview process, keep in mind that most comms executives want to join companies that:

- Have a trove of great, yet untold, stories to tap into and tell
- A founder who appreciates and values the role of communications, and is willing to participate
- Give comms a seat at the table. Comms leads want access, information, and to feel like a valued member of the team. Without access to full information, it becomes very hard to do their job.
- Moves quickly and will provide answers when they need them.
- Have the appetite to grow a team over time (or at least bring on agency support).

Onboarding Top 5

As you welcome your comms hire, use these tips to ensure a smooth onboarding and optimal results.

1 Provide access and information.

Add the lead to any meeting you feel it could be helpful for them to be in, including product, quarterly planning meetings and the like. Send emails with context, and give them access to all internal systems/communications platforms etc. A comms lead is only as good as the information and trust they receive.

2 Outline budgets.

Let the person know what the budget for comms will be, so they can resource accordingly and think about additional headcount of bringing in an agency.

3 Be clear about priorities.

Together with the CEO, CMO and any other crucial leads, agree upon the top 3-5 comms priorities for the short term and the next year. These should align with or complement your larger business objectives/OKRs. This will help keep things focused.

4 Ask to see plans.

Once a comms lead has settled in and better understands the business, ask for a 60-90-120 day plan.

5 Be reasonably patient.

Just because you have a PR lead in house does not mean you'll see results overnight. Giving them a chance to learn, absorb and plan, and you will see the benefits in the long run.

About the author: [Joan Touchstone](#) is head of communications at IVP.

