

Insider Tips on Finding and Managing an Outside Consultant for Public Affairs

Finding an outside consultant that fits with your team and your budget can be a challenge. And once they're hired, how do you ensure that they'll deliver? We spoke to consultants about building a strong relationship with their clients, their own perception of their job, and how to avoid common pitfalls when managing outside vendors. This tip sheet is designed to help organizations that need outside support for their public affairs, advocacy, or government relations efforts, please find below some advice and best practices to ensure your organization is successfully leveraging your consultants and vendors.

Finding a Consultant

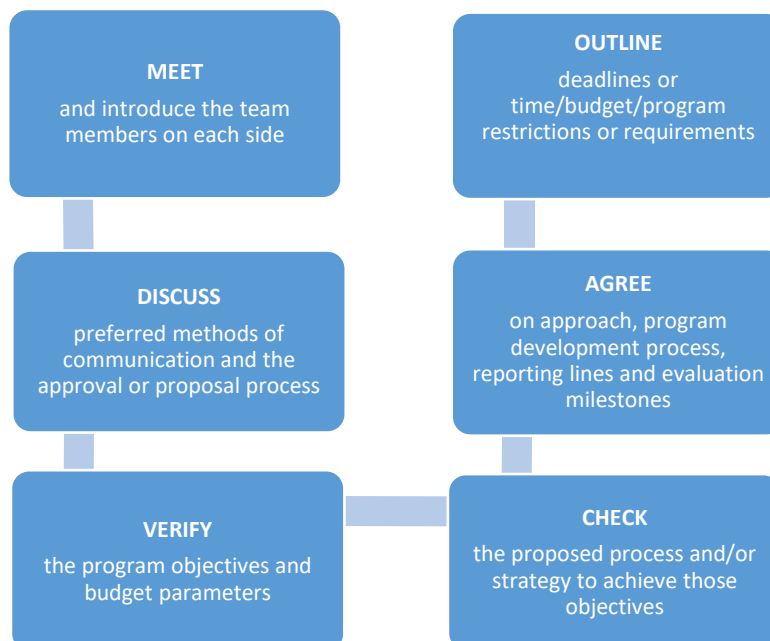
A request for proposal (RFP) is a great talent search tool because they are specific, and help you make a comparison of solutions from an objective and even playing field of competitors. Organizations should put considerable time and effort into the RFP, because it can truly determine how successful the consultant-client relationship will be. A clear and concise RFP will include information about your company's overarching goals for the project, as well as a list of the products or services that you are seeking. For finding software, try to include a few use cases for your use of the software. If you don't have the time or can't go through the entire RFP process, try to ask each consultant the same questions, job interview style. Don't forget to ask what they believe to be their company's greatest strength and what makes their company stand out from competitors.

Set clear expectations to avoid problems

During the discovery stage of working with a consultant, try to provide as much direction as possible, this will lead everyone to better end results. Try to provide some background and context for your organization, "institutional knowledge takes time to develop and organizational nuances are rarely black and white. We'll look to you to provide the knowledge we need to quickly onboard as an extension of your team" says Maggie Johnson, senior account supervisor at Edelman. Once you have a consultants or a vendor in-place they can be overly task-driven, so if the goals of the project or organization change, make sure to update them on the bigger picture. Ensure that everyone agrees on deadlines and the scope of work before you get too far into a project.

Organizing your team with outside consultant

These steps ensure a solid foundation for working with an outside consultant or firm by starting everyone off on the same page.



Maintain open and constant communication

From the beginning, figure out the best way to regularly contact your consultant, whether that's a weekly call or meeting. Examine if project management software like [Basecamp](#) or online communications tools like [Slack](#) can help your organization manage this relationship more effectively. If you are working with a consultant or vendor who touches various departments within your organization, make sure the right stakeholders are communicating with your consultant. For example, be sure to facilitate communications between tech or legal departments which may need to be included in the consultant process. Also, transparency and honesty can go a long way; your consultant must hear about how you feel about their work, good or bad.

It's a Partnership

Successful consultants should view your success as their success and therefore successful consultant relationships should ultimately be a partnership. Johnson states that organizations should try "to move past the construct of a client-agency relationship to one of a partnership that is built on collaboration, trust, and mutual benefit." Give your consultants a clear path to collaborate; consultants work well with others, but they have a job to do and need the space to do so. While collaboration will lead you to your end goal, keep in mind that you needed to hire a professional, so and let them share their expertise. If you or members of your organization are too overbearing it can often stifle your consultant's creativity. Be willing to do things differently; your consultant was brought in to unleash a new perspective and fresh ideas.

Use Your Available Resources

Not every consultant, vendor or software solution is right for you and your organization. Do your research: check references from the Public Affairs Council membership and reach out to organizations who had similar problems which needed outside assistance. Please feel free to [contact the Public Affairs Council](#) for more information on this topic or for a list of consultants or vendors that specialize in each area of public affairs.

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