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Finding PR and Communications Agencies: New Report Highlights Agency Search & Hiring Best Practices in \$15 Billion Industry

Survey of Fortune 1000 Companies & Associations Underscores Importance of More Thorough Search Process to Achieve Better Outcomes

WASHINGTON, D.C., July 31, 2019 – When companies search for mid- or senior-level employees they cast the net wide, engage recruiters to identify qualified candidates, conduct numerous interviews, shortlist finalists, and check references before making the hiring decision.

What do large companies and associations do when they hire public relations agencies on which they will spend \$15 billion a year? Three-quarters of communications leaders surveyed rely on their industry experience, and two-thirds on word-of-mouth recommendations, to identify just two to five agency candidates for searches where they may spend as much as \$1 million or more on the selected agency.

The new report from CommunicationsMatch™ and RFP Associates, supported by Researchscape International, [*The Impact of the Agency Selection Process on Public Relations Programs and Outcomes*](#), provides insights into how Fortune 1000 companies and not-for-profit associations search for and hire agencies, and points to opportunities on how to improve search outcomes for both client organizations and the agencies they engage.

The first national survey of senior communications and marketing communications leaders focused on agency search practices, the research was developed with the support of the Institute for Public Relations (IPR), and input from agency and communications leaders. The results draw upon 89 responses to a research questionnaire fielded between February and April, 2019, and supplemental qualitative interviews. Initial findings were presented at the IPR Bridge Conference. The research report has been added to the IPR research library.

“We found there’s a stark contrast between the process used to search for experienced employees and that for finding agencies,” said Steven Drake, principal with RFP Associates. “Few organizations use a comprehensive search process or search tools and consultants for agencies, which would be standard practice for individual hires.”

The report also highlights links between a thorough search and hiring process and satisfaction with hired agencies. Despite the limited number of agency candidates in the selection process, about two-thirds of respondents said they use RFPs and other tools to evaluate agencies and select those best-suited for assignments.

The survey shows that RFPs are often incomplete and do not provide all the information agencies need to respond. More than half (54%) of respondents said their RFPs do not include a budget – a critical requirement for agencies.

The report also reveals that in many cases clients believed agencies are falling short. Agencies are often cited by client organizations as delivering boilerplate responses, upselling, and delivering off-base proposals.

“Despite high ‘overall’ satisfaction with agencies, clients were only moderately or less satisfied with agencies in critical areas including meeting objectives, proactivity, account management, staff turnover, and budgeting,” added Robert Udowitz, principal, RFP Associates. “As a result, it perhaps should not be a surprise that only three-in-ten of the primary agency relationships among those surveyed were reported to be four years or longer in length.”

The report also shows that satisfaction is directly connected to agency longevity -- the longer the relationship, the higher the levels of client satisfaction. Notably, satisfaction with larger agencies being paid \$1 million or more annually was lower than that for agency relationships where budgets were smaller.

The research data demonstrates that client expectations of agencies are more likely to be met if a thorough agency search process precedes the hiring of an agency. Overall satisfaction with agencies was highest when RFPs and other key components of a thorough search process had been employed.

“Our research shows that there are opportunities on both the client and agency side to improve the hiring process and achieve better outcomes,” added Simon Erskine Locke, founder & CEO of CommunicationsMatch. “Using search consultants and tools to cast the net wide at the beginning of a search, and having an effective and comprehensive RFQ and RFP process to evaluate and select agencies for interviews, clearly provides a path to better outcomes and hiring the best agency for the job.”

[Download the report here.](#)

[CommunicationsMatch](#) is a free agency search platform with more than 5,000 agency and individual profiles, with hiring tools and resources that help companies find and engage agencies that match needs.

[RFP Associates, LLC](#) is a communications agency search firm that has developed a specialized search and selection methodology that improves the process of identifying, evaluating, and hiring agencies.

[Researchscape International](#) is an agile market research consultancy delivering high-quality custom and omnibus surveys, automated reporting tools, as well as other research-related services, to marketers and agencies.

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