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## Frustration Forum

### Rocky transition

Ex-reporters bring expertise—and headaches—to PR job

More often than not, PR executives jump at the chance to employ former journalists.

Their ability to improve story pitches and boost media relations programs makes hiring them a no-brainer.

Or does it?

Certainly, reporters bring talents that can improve PR programs in many ways. But the problem is that many journalists lack critical PR skills.

“They understand what’s newsworthy and how the news medium works, but to understand strategic planning is completely new territory for them,” says David Warschawski, president of Warschawski Public Relations.

And that can make the decision to hire a journalist a bit tougher. You must weigh reporter’s skills against the time you’ll spend training them in other areas.

“We’ve had some candidates who had a great media background in industry sectors that were a great fit for us, but we spent so much time educating and training them that it simply wasn’t worth it,” Warschawski says.

Here are some common problems and benefits you’ll likely encounter if a reporter joins your ranks:

#### **The skills they lack...**

Reporters certainly possess strong writing skills, but that doesn’t mean they know how to develop a strategic plan.

“Print and broadcast reporters often see the end result of a PR program and they don’t realize what it took to get from point A to point B,” Warschawski says. “There’s a tremendous amount of reverse training to educate someone who comes from a reporter’s background.”

Here are some of the skills they need:

- **Client relations.** Although journalists are great interviewers, working with a client is uncharted territory.

“To ask a journalist to one day be on the receiving end of an interview and then turn the tables so they are shaping the strategy of a client is often difficult,” Warschawski says.

- **Approval process.** Bureaucracy will likely frustrate journalists, says Michael Greece, managing director of Padilla Speer Beardsley in New York.

“Reporters are independent agents,” Greece says. “To clear things and coordinate their efforts with a CEO or lawyer requires more patience than they’re used to—and requires education.”

- **Business strategy.** Don't assume that reporters understand how PR helps achieve business goals.

"That is a skill that most journalists have never had a chance to use," Warschawski says. "It's something that good PR practitioners have honed over years and years of practice."

- **Communication skills.** Ron Dresner steers clear of former broadcast reporters who want a PR job because they lack a key skill.

"Yes, they know the TV medium, but it doesn't mean they're good communicators," says Dresner, president of Your PR Department. "Just because they read what was written on a TelePrompTer doesn't mean they can communicate."

Greece has also had problems with former broadcasters. "It's not glamorous enough for them and they're not interested in doing the job," Greece says. "I think they're mistaken. The opportunity to create influence for an organization is very glamorous."

Dresner, however, has hired various print newspaper reporters. "From Web copy to the typical press release, print media reporters understand the [need for a] concise headline, to [a] press release style that is effective for all media," he says.

### ... and the skills they bring

But former journalists can bring many positives to PR.

Here are a few:

- **Multiple tasks.** Reporters can juggle projects and still meet their deadlines.

"Agency life is one where you have to move quickly, and agility is a great characteristic of deadline-driven journalists," Greece says. And the fact that they aren't easily intimidated helps. "That's a powerful attribute," he says. They're not daunted by tough personalities. They can handle barking CEOs."

- **The credibility factor.** "There's a built-in level of credibility when you can call a journalist and pitch them a story from the position of one journalist to another," Warschawski says. That credibility is huge, Greece agrees.

"You build instant credibility with a former reporter on board, and that's a real advantage," he says.

- **What makes a good story.** "The ability to understand what is and isn't important in a pitch is invaluable," Greece says. "They understand the needs of the journalist and what makes news." And, fortunately, reporters are turned off by "spin." "If a client wants to sell a story, they inherently believe it has to be spun too much," Greece says. "But they [journalists] filter out the spin. If they smell a rat," the media will to.

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