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PR embraces assets of relationship marketing

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Although many people believe in the maxim: "It's who you know, not what you know," few build a business model on it.

One exception is Thomas P. O'Neill of the Boston-based public relations agency O'Neill and Associates LLC. Although the firm is known chiefly for its lobbying work, O'Neill has built a so-called relationship management practice based on mining his corporate contacts.

For clients, the program involves a series of meetings with executives of companies they are targeting as potential customers.

Although he declined to reveal revenue, O'Neill said the work makes up between 18 percent to 25 percent of the agency's business at any given time. The shop combines the introduction work with traditional public relations efforts and, in some cases, its lobbying specialty.

"Of our last dozen clients, half have some degree of relationship-marketing involvement," O'Neill said.

O'Neill said about a half-dozen of his employees work primarily on relationship marketing. The agency has about 25 employees, he said, up from the 15 employed by the agency when he bought it back from GPC International, a subsidiary of New York-based OmniCom Group Inc., earlier this year.

Although many of the region's larger and long-standing public relations agencies say they practice relationship marketing, most say they do it in the regular course of working with a client. While FitzGerald Communications Inc. of Boston, for example, does not market the service separately, it's something the agency "winds up doing automatically," said president and CEO Maura FitzGerald.

In one recent situation, the agency, which is a subsidiary of New York-based OmniCom Group Inc., introduced a client that sells products to large telecommunications carriers such as Sprint to carrier clients of other OmniCom agencies.

"Our client wanted a picture of what the carriers' long-term marketing plans were and areas of customer need," FitzGerald said. "(So) we hooked our client up in discussions with them."

One customer completely removed from the agency's government work is The Bostonian Group Inc., a Boston-based insurance-consulting and brokerage firm. The company retained O'Neill and Associates about 16 months ago to "make introductions to qualified, targeted prospects" at the CEO and CFO level, according to Bostonian president Jim Blue.

"We are a growth-oriented company," Blue said. "We're always interested in being able to meet people who are receptive to, frankly, aggressive and service-oriented firms."

Relationship marketing can be an extension of a client's business development arm by helping clients go after targets they otherwise might not be able to reach on their own, said

Shelly McPhee, chief operating officer at O'Neill and Associates.

"Given the economy and some of the difficult times companies are experiencing, we present an opportunity," McPhee said.

For Westborough-based retail and wholesale energy supplier and energy consulting company Noresco, O'Neill has combined lobbying work and relationship marketing, according to Steve Clevett, senior vice president and general manager of the company's energy infrastructure group. Besides introducing Noresco executives to local and state government officials and political leaders, the agency has set up meetings with construction firms and real estate developers, Clevett said.

"The business we're in is complicated," Clevett said. "We need to talk to a lot of different people inside the government and elsewhere who can influence what can happen to a specific project, and they've certainly helped us."

Yet, many agencies take a somewhat informal approach to relationship marketing, including Watertown-based Sterling Hager Inc.

"We do that and we do it in spades, but I don't consider it a separate line of business," said president Jim Joyal. "(And) I don't charge for it. Our whole premise for being in business is to make others successful."

Technology public relations company Miller Consulting Group Inc. of Boston has a similar philosophy, according to chairman and CEO Andy Miller. Like Joyal, Miller said his agency neither separates out the service from other services, nor charges for introductions.

"We've done it as a matter of course," Miller said. "We make introductions to venture capitalists, potential strategic partners, even potential employees. We do that as a fundamental part of what we do for clients."



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O'Neill and Associates chief operating officer Shelly McPhee (left) and senior account executive Christine Sullivan set up meetings with potential customers for The Bostonian Group Inc. president Jim Blue as part of the agency's relationship-marketing program.