

Corporate Public Issues

And Their Management

Brief

Guide to Selecting an Issue Management Consultant—2012

In these days of dwindling resources and growing expectations for corporate issue management, hiring an external independent contractor on a defined project basis can be the route to “right sizing” resources to needs. The solution offers a more flexible and short-term commitment than the complexities of finding and hiring an employee.

More strategically, however, perhaps you need a consultant, a third-party expert whose **experience** you can draw upon, of whom you can ask questions and glean advice (i.e., *counsel*). A consultant can provide **instruction** and **insight** that are not readily available within your firm.

As someone who views what seems like the day-to-day torrent from a distance, a consultant can offer an **unbiased opinion** on potential issue positions and plans. He or she may bring **access to relationships** that create effective alliances or partnerships. If there is internal conflict that blocks forward movement on an issue, a consultant can serve as a **buffer zone** or **mediator**.

But finding a good match between client and consultant in the field of issue management is a bit more complex than checking star ratings in on-line reviews.

There are plenty of Guides that take you through a “generic” process of soliciting Requests for Proposals, checking references and evaluating results.

In this *CPI Brief*, you will find a dozen questions that are relevant when seeking counsel in the field of issue management.

For the Client: Know Thyself

First question: **Should we hire an Issue Management Consultant?**

Especially in large organizations that are filled with advance-degreed people who have deep knowledge of their subject, you may in fact already have at hand the skills or information you seek. The suitable adage here: “Company X doesn’t know how much Company X knows.” Make an effort to assess what activities and individuals are already involved in work that is relevant to your issue management needs.

If you have decided that, yes, outside assistance is needed, be sure to smooth the way for a successful outcome. Here are a few preliminary things to think through before moving forward to select a consultant:

Be certain you understand and create awareness of the **value the project will bring** and that it has necessary **resources** and **support** from top management. It’s almost trite but it is surprising how often this prerequisite does not exist. If there are strong internal personalities or functions, the consultant must be operating from a level that has—and is seen to have—access to advise decision-makers. Clout counts.

Understand what is “possible.” Has the train already left the station, so to speak? Adjust your goals accordingly.

Be willing to not know all the answers. In fact, understand and **embrace the power of uncertainty**. True “engagement” results when stakeholders feel their input is listened to and acted upon. Not having all the answers is acceptable as long as you don’t act as though

you do. (Footnote: Beware the perils of arrogance.)

A related suggestion: **Avoid “analysis paralysis.”** At some point (unless it’s your strategy to stand aside) you’ve got to stop collecting insights and watching events unfold. Go out there and take action. “Don’t let the perfect defeat the good,” as they say. Issues don’t stand still.

Are the leaders of the organization **willing to act** upon recommendations that the consultant may suggest? These may include communicating with and developing respect for adversaries or exiting key businesses or markets.

That last point moves us to the next question that will help determine what type of issue management consultant you will hire:

How do you Define Issue Management?

Issue Management operates along a “spectrum,” ranging from after-the-fact “damage control” to the forward-looking skills of spotting and forging leadership on emerging issues. Choose a firm that has skill sets and a track record at an appropriate place along that spectrum.

Your definition of issue management will be informed by the next question:

Where is the issue in its life cycle?

Although the time for issue evolution has compressed to the point of potential global visibility in minutes, continued experience proves that all issues evolve from what is, at first, only a distant signal. And, since by definition, an issue is an unmet demand, if not resolved, it grows in intensity.

“If it’s really early in the life cycle of an issue,” observes **David Laufer**, president of the New York City-based consulting firm Forum Strategies, “you may need someone—perhaps an academic—who can scan the scientific literature, pull threads together and connect dots on an issue that someone else might not connect. If it’s later on, and you really have to go beyond just getting your arms around the issue, then maybe you want a company with capabilities in

action orientation, advocacy, building partnerships and stakeholder engagement tools. Or, in the regulated industries where many of our clients operate, you may need someone who can help in a targeted effort to respond to a threat. Where we really enjoy working at is the nexus between the translation of what your issue IS into actionable things that you can DO with the audiences that matter most for the resolution of an issue.”



Laufer’s point raises a final question to help consider the type of consultant you seek:

Issue or Infrastructure?

Do you have a specific issue on which assistance is needed or do you seek help on building an infrastructure and operating procedure for issues, in general?

Choosing the IM Consultant: Key Differentiators

You are now ready to be reviewing individual consultant prospects.

What is their knowledge of the disciplines of issue management?

Can you discern from conversation a sophisticated awareness of issues, stakeholders and strategy? Or, is this a quick study who has hung out the IM shingle over other expertise? Likely recent entrants include project management, software programming and lobbying, for example.

What is the consultant’s personality and style?

- What is the consultant’s pitch—not relative to sales talk. Rather, is this a gun-slinger or a Gandhi?
- What is his or her style, language and approach to complexity or confrontation?
- Does the firm (or its affiliates) provide any service to which you, your company or your stakeholders would object?

What is the consultant's reputation?

How is the firm regarded by stakeholders with whom they have relationships—including “respected adversaries?” People claim that friends on one issue may be enemies next time but is that a solid foundation for building trust, if indeed, the complexity of the issue comes down to a matter of trust?

Can the consultant span functions if necessary?

The solution you seek may be within a specific function (media or government affairs) but if the issue merits a more integrated enterprise-wide plan of action, is the consultant comfortable interfacing with areas such as product development, operations, human resources, marketing and finance? “Issues are multi-faceted by nature,” observes **Teresa**



Teresa Crane

Yancey Crane, founder of Issue Management Innovators, an issue management consulting firm that specializes in building IM infrastructure and tools. “A strategic issue plan will incorporate diverse functions within an organization.”

Is the consultant offering a solution that will be accepted and implemented in your business?

The last thing you want is an issue-filled Black Binder that Sits on the Shelf or its modern equivalent: the Issue Database that is expensive to create and maintain but seldom referenced, is user-unfriendly and seen as irrelevant.

(Optional) Asking for Proposals

Having selected a handful of well-referenced contenders, you may wish to ask them to submit a proposal. While many firms, especially the larger ones, do not expect a fee for this service, *CPI* feels that it is desirable for a client to provide compensation, making it clear that you have high expectations of receiving a carefully thought-out plan for issue action or program development.

The consultant you want will identify pertinent issues, analyze resources and interested parties, place priorities on an action agenda and outline a strategy to achieve the desired goal.

Or, if you want process development, the consultant can provide a time-line of steps to implement with an idea of time and resource requirements. The contract between the consultant and your organization will provide for supplemental research and information, as well as implementation of the action plan.

If payment is provided for this thoughtful analysis, there will be less opposition in the event that the management consultant is not requested for further services.

The Contractual Agreement

CPI defers the technicalities of sensitive legal questions to a qualified attorney. There are, however, a few standard items that your written agreement should cover:

- Define the problem or opportunity.
- List the objectives, scope and nature of the engagement.
- Specify the areas to be covered by the consultant.
- Outline the recommended program for accomplishing the work.
- List general methods to be used.
- State who will do the work (especially if your staff members will be involved).
- Provide an estimate of the time necessary to accomplish the program.
- Estimate a fee for professional services and out-of-pocket expenses.

Ethics and Courtesy should be part of the terms of engagement. Look for acknowledgment of the following matters:

- **Respect for proprietary information:** “...We will not take personal, financial, or other advantage of material or inside information coming to our attention as a result of our professional relationship with clients...”

- **Conflict of Interest:** “Only with their knowledge and agreement will we serve two or more competing clients, or clients in any known adversary relationship. Under certain circumstances we recognize that conflicts on issues or in relationships may be such that service to both clients is inappropriate and we would have to discontinue our relationship with one.”
- **Referral fees:** “Any fees or commissions to others for client referrals, or any arrangement for franchising our practice to others will be fully transparent to the client.”

An added note: As a matter of courtesy the client who takes time, after selecting a consultant, to notify all bidders of the choice will be taken more seriously the next time a proposal is requested.

Initiating the Program

Having selected your issue management consultant, launch the project with an announcement that indicates the purpose of the engagement, its relationship to their

assignments and the importance of their cooperation. Revisit the “self knowledge” points earlier in this article and make them known to those with whom the consultant will interface.

Evaluation

Two evaluation periods are optimal, one immediately upon completion of the on-site program, and another, after a suitable period of time has passed. In evaluating the consultant’s performance, ask yourself the question proffered by the professional political candidate:

- Is our company better off today than it was when the consultant began work?
- Would you hire the consultant again?
- If so, is there a milestone or future point in time when it is appropriate to engage the consultant again to help take the next step forward in developing your own in-house issue management competency?

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**forumstrategies
& communications**

- Public affairs strategy and outreach
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For more information, contact David Laufer, Partner
212.554.2160
laufer@forumstrategies.com
805 Third Avenue . 14th Floor . New York, NY 10022

TERESA YANCEY CRANE
FOUNDER

ISSUE MANAGEMENT INNOVATORS

801 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Suite 1121
Washington, DC 20004 USA
+1.703.777.8964 | +1.202.628.0547

Publisher and Editor: Teresa Yancey Crane

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