Appendix B: Working with a PR Firm

Before signing a contract with a public relationship firm, consider the following:

1. Write down exactly what you need before you talk with a public relations firm. This can be formal (a 'Request for Proposal' or RFP) or an informal memo. Include:
   - Your goals for public relations and media work;
   - Your target audience
   - The amount of money you have available to spend;
   - Your desire to have donated creative services and a discount on production costs;
   - The time frame in which you want the work to be done;
   - The person at your organization who will be the liaison with the firm; and
   - Key deadlines that are non-negotiable.
2. Take your RFP or lists of needs to two or three firms and see what they can offer you. Ask to see samples of past work done for both paying and pro bono (non-paying) clients. Vet the firm by asking previous clients about their experience with the firm.
3. Ask the firms to send you a brief proposal of what they would be able to do for you. Be sure it responds to the needs you have identified.
4. Ask to meet with several firms in their offices to get a feel for the way they work and their mix of clients. Consider the following to help you know which firm is right for you.
   - Do you like the style that they have used with other clients?
   - Do you trust that the people you have met understand your message and your goals?
   - Did they seem eager to win your business?
   - What benefit might they draw from working with you (i.e., added exposure, creative challenge)? It's better to work with a firm that might get something out of the relationship, too.
   - Small firms may be more eager to get exposure and make a name for themselves, so they may view working for you as a chance to make a splash on a compelling issue. However, small firms need to pay the bills, so you may end up as a lower priority at deadline time.
   - Larger firms may have more staff to devote to your work, and might assign a junior person to take charge of your account. This can benefit you because they may bring added enthusiasm and rigor to the work. Larger firms also have access to databases, clip services, and a host of other resources that they can tap for your project. However, pro bono projects can get lost at larger firms, so be sure to invest time in staying on top of the work.
5. Ask other nonprofits in your community about their experience with local firms, and get suggestions from them on other things to watch out for.
6. Once you select a firm, work together on a plan that will meet your needs. Specifics may change over time, as the firm comes up with new ideas for you.
7. Be open to new ideas, but be vigilant about your budget. If you cannot afford a great idea, perhaps the firm can help you find ways to cover costs, or other funders may be willing to support the idea.
8. Most firms can donate "creative"—ideas, slogans, artwork—but they must charge for the cost of paper, printing, mailing, and other deliverables. To save money, ask them for a list of reporters and ideas for what to send, then do the mailing yourself.
9. Think of this work as starting a long-term relationship. Over time, the firm can get to know your organization and your goals, and can continue think of creative public relations strategies beyond the limits of a single campaign or project.