

ESSENCE[®]

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MELODY McDOWELL: THE SOFT SELL OF A PR PRO

HOW SHE GOT STARTED:

Seventeen years ago, Melody McDowell, the only black public-information officer at the Illinois Department of Corrections, was put in the uncomfortable position of having to train a new boss who didn't seem to value her. She took a deep breath and prepared to start her own PR firm. "I gave myself 90 days." McDowell then put most of her free time and spare energy into prospecting for contract work. On the eighty-ninth day, she quit the DOC and went to work for her first client, a small social-service agency.

Running MELODY's service from a home office that first year, McDowell opened an outside office as soon as she could afford it. "I have an office in downtown Chicago, one block from the Art Institute," says McDowell, who owns a house in the suburbs. Today MELODY's service has annual billings in excess of \$150,000.

DETERMINE THE MAXIMUM NUMBER OF CUSTOMERS YOU CAN SERVE WELL.

McDowell's client mix includes corporations, small businesses and nonprofit organizations such as the Chicago Minority Business Development Council and the Human Resources Development Institute. She juggles a dozen or so clients at a time, and that's as many as she can comfortably serve. Because MELODY's service is a one-woman show, McDowell does everything from writing annual reports to designing and managing statewide promotion campaigns to answering the phone.

STAY READY.

But the firm can also handle pressure: Recently, a client called up in a panic because the annual report and brochure he had hired someone else to do hadn't worked out. The next day, McDowell began the arduous task of pulling together in five weeks what someone else had had five months to complete. "When your client is in a bind you can really prove your mettle, which enhances your reputation," she says.

KEEP YOUR PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS SIMPLE AND TO THE POINT.

McDowell highlights her skills, effectiveness and personalized approach in a simple two-color, four-page brochure that features client testimonials. "I don't waste a lot of time and money on elaborate proposals and multimedia dog and pony shows," she says. Instead, she shows clearly and succinctly how she can help clients.

STAY IN TOUCH WITH PAST CLIENTS.

Networking and word-of-mouth referrals are her most important channels for new business. She calls clients to say hello and to let them know what she's been up to lately, and she invites them to events. She buys tickets to Bulls games to give away and sends out client gifts every year. Last year she sent gifts to celebrate her firm's "Sweet 16" birthday.

THANK CLIENTS AND MEET NEW PROSPECTS BY HOLDING A SIGNATURE ANNUAL EVENT.

This year McDowell invited more than 200 clients, media and friends to the fifth annual Memorial Day barbecue at her suburban home. "We had 87 folks show up, and we had a ball.

Even if everyone I invite can't come, they remember they were invited; it's the place to be if you're in town," she says. The barbecue is not a big financial investment; it is much more personal and relaxed than your standard company holiday party, and it builds relationships that mean business.

WORDS OF WISDOM:

"Do quality work, do what it takes to get the job done and be nice to everyone, because you never know where your next referral will come from."

