

*State of Independence*

## Tag Team: The Independent Practitioner and the CEO

By Tim O'Brien, APR  
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Clients come in all shapes and sizes — and titles too. We often talk about “clients” in a monolithic sense, but in reality there’s an obvious difference between a situation when the client is a marketing manager and when the client is the CEO. While some independents may find that it’s rare that they interact directly with the CEO of a client organization, others find that working with the C-suite is indeed their “suite spot.”

These independents have found that because CEOs may not have prior knowledge of their firms, it’s critical to get to the heart of matters as quickly as possible.

### Think logically.

Joan Gladstone, APR, Fellow PRSA, is a crisis communications counselor and CEO of Gladstone International in Laguna Beach, Calif. She finds that the most important skill in working with CEOs is to think logically.

“Many CEOs have MBAs, finance or law degrees. When we present plans and recommendations, we need to think like they do and make our case based on facts and logic,” she said. “For example, in the very early stages of a crisis, we may only know a few facts, such as when or where an incident occurred.



In that stage, we often don’t know why it happened or what we will eventually do to prevent it from happening again. In that context, when we advise the CEO, it’s important to base our recommendations on known facts. This will help us guide them away from hasty and risky decisions to a deliberate course of action. This approach is why CEOs rely on us.”

### Prioritize time.

Many independents who work with CEOs find that during crisis situations, executives may be more receptive to outside counsel. During the normal routine, however, when communications issues may not be the highest priorities, CEO time constraints can be an issue.

“I think the biggest challenge we have is making the little time we have with them count for as much as we can,” said Jason Sprenger, APR, president of Game Changer Communications in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. “Time is incredibly valuable to them, and there are many demands on that time from the inside and outside. We must be able to cut to the chase and tell them what they need to hear, not just what they want to hear. When we do our jobs well and deliver our counsel in a calm but confident manner, we can often earn ourselves more time with them.”

## **Earn respect.**

Independents often find the first order of business is to earn the respect of the CEO as quickly as possible. This comes with demonstrating a strong understanding of the issues, subject matter and challenges the organization faces, and then providing counsel that incorporates that understanding with solutions-oriented recommendations and plans. Debbie Wetherhead, president of Wetherhead Communications in Atlanta, works most often with CEOs as a media trainer.

"I've found that some of the most effective rules of engagement with CEOs center on being strategic, aligning PR counsel and plans with company goals and being current on marketplace news and competitor activities," she said.

Wetherhead stressed that at each stage in the process, it's imperative that counselors

"showcase public relations' value in relation to revenue, reputation and relationships." All agree there is no substitute for preparation. CEOs are known not to waste time before challenging communicators with direct and difficult questions. PR counselors must enter the process with an agenda and be ready to promptly work through the major issues and decisions that will shape the communications process.

In the end, it's about building trust. The more quickly you can do that the more successful you can be at winning the confidence of the CEO and providing superior value.

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