



# Size doesn't matter

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It would seem unlikely that a shoe manufacturer would need much crisis communications help, yet Colorado-based Crocs has faced negative media attention during the past few years after reports surfaced of injuries related to its shoes getting caught in escalators. Early last year, Crocs ended its relationship with Ogilvy PR Worldwide and hired Linhart PR, after an extensive RFP process. And though Linhart wasn't specifically hired for crisis help, Crocs senior PR manager Tia Mattson couldn't be more pleased with the firm's "seamless integration" of all PR needs.

"Consumer media work is our number-one priority, but when we had crisis management, Linhart mobilized easily and quickly – and it was the same team," Mattson says. "Other agencies didn't mobilize as quickly and work as well with us."

During the crisis, Linhart advised the internal PR team, executives, and legal counsel, and it also helped develop an ongoing safety awareness campaign that launched in July.

"They're strategic partners," Mattson says. "It's tremendous for us to have a PR firm that works with our executives. Linhart also launched a CSR program [SolesUnited] in January, and it has really delivered strong results. To have a small group tap into CSR, crisis, and consumer coverage is ideal for Crocs."

Mattson says Crocs doesn't use the term "AOR," but Linhart is the company's "primary" agency. She's very pleased that the agency is Colorado-based, noting that the firm's team provided in-house help while she was on maternity leave.

"Location wasn't a deciding factor [in hiring Linhart], but it's been one of the best features," Mattson says. "It's ideal to have such a wide base of talent in one central location."

## **Growing interest**

Crocs is not alone in selecting a boutique agency over a larger, multinational firm. Once thought of as only good for small, niche clients, boutique agencies are increasingly tapped to work on larger, even global, clients and projects.

About four months ago, GN Netcom, which makes Jabra brand headsets, switched from Hill & Knowlton to 360 PR. Matt Baker, GN's VP of marketing, North America, explains while H&K "did a good job," 360's team is a better fit with GN.

“PR plays a huge role in our overall marketing, and I needed a team that really helps us deliver against our objectives,” Baker adds. “If you're Motorola, you probably need H&K because of the magnitude of what you're doing. When you're our size, a boutique is far more effective, and it's a much stronger relationship because we kind of look like each other.”

Lucy Siegel, president and CEO of Bridge Global Strategies (BGS) and founding member of the newly formed PR Boutiques International network, thinks cost efficiency also helps boutiques compete successfully against multinationals.

“That doesn't mean rates are low, but overhead is less,” she says. “You can't make money putting senior people against business at a big agency. Almost all boutiques are headed by senior people [who] want to work on client business. Boutique owners bill themselves as consultants. That doesn't happen in even midsized agencies.”

Indeed, from the client perspective, access to senior counsel and team consistency are essential to maintaining a strong partnership. “There's a huge void in large agencies,” Baker notes. “The most senior person on your business can't spend the time you want, and junior people don't know what to do next, so you spend a lot of time micromanaging... I can talk to a managing director at 360 anytime I want.”

Alberto Arebalos joined Google Latin America last summer as director of corporate communications and public affairs. Previously, as senior manager of corporate communications, Latin America for Cisco Systems, he hired Miami-based boutique agency Intuic, because he wasn't getting the service he wanted from multinational agencies. When he joined Google, the company let him choose the agency he wanted, and he stuck with Intuic.

“Big agencies promise a lot, but don't always deliver,” Arebalos says. “They don't have the structure, skills, or people to support big brands in Latin America. You see the VP [in] the pitch, [and end up] working with a junior person who doesn't have any idea about your business. All PR is local. If you leave local operations to choose the best agency in that market, it probably isn't a local branch of a big agency.”

Like Mattson and Baker, Arebalos likes the attention he gets from a boutique. “It comes down to service,” he says. “The small agency is more focused on the client. You're a big client for them, and they're eager to please.”

### **Gaining recognition**

Laura Tomasetti, MD at 360 PR, began her career at Porter Novelli. She thinks large corporations are more open now to different types of firm models – whether they're looking for specialty expertise or general practice – and she notes that 360 pitches against big agencies more often than boutiques.

“Clients [want] the right people,” she says. “They're open to a broader range of agencies as they look for the right resources. Years ago, when I was with a big agency, we never pitched against boutiques. Now I find there'll be one or two big agencies, one or two midsized agencies, and a boutique.”

BGS' Siegel adds that clients also appreciate the flexibility boutiques offer. “I can work with the staff here [or] bring in outside partners who are perfect for a client and form a team,” she says. “I have... more flexibility. It's a huge advantage for the client and a lot more fun for me.”

Sharon Linhart, managing partner of Linhart PR, says success – for both client and agency – is born from great partnerships. “Crocs has a strong, smart internal team that works so well with our team,” she notes. “We're in each other's shoes, so to speak, every day.”

### **Boutique's advantages**

High-level service from senior talent

Team consistency and integration

Responsiveness, agility, and flexibility

Cost efficiency