

PRWeek

London becoming global PR hub

BY DAVID GALLAGHER JULY 24, 2006

I love New York. The city that never sleeps never fails to get me all goose-pimplly when the skyline emerges over the Van Wyck Expressway on the drive to Manhattan. It's vibrant, smart, and the ancestral home of PR.

But after six years of working in London, I've realized that when it comes to global thinking, PR's center of gravity is no longer in the Big Apple, but the Big Smoke.

Sure, London has long enjoyed prominence as Europe's gateway to a fast track into local markets. Global campaigns, however, were almost invariably designed in and managed from New York.

No longer. PR planners are increasingly turning to London for global solutions. Our own agency has seen London-based global assignments quadruple in recent years, and while we're an admittedly narrow sample, something's clearly going on. Other agencies report similar trends, and I think there are a few reasons why.

As bankers learned long ago, it's hard to beat London for convenience in a 24/7 world. With a workday that overlaps at least partially those of Asia, the Americas, Europe, the Mideast, and Africa, London teams are uniquely situated to leverage that most precious commodity: time.

Marketing giants like Procter & Gamble say they crave ideas above all other creative services and put London at the bleeding edge of idea inspiration. The West End, Shoreditch, and Canary Wharf, among many London hot spots, comprise a vast network of pioneers from advertising, design, film, music, software, and, of course, PR – all creating extraordinary fertility for the next big idea.

England's native language is a descendant of a Germanic tongue from the Frisian area. But nobody calls it Frisian. They call it English, and leading businesses covet English speakers (even in France) to communicate. Most of our larger London clients aren't based in London, or even in the UK, but they come to us because we think big and deliver in English.

The very best of the UK's nearly 3,000 PR firms have met tough consultancy management standards (CMS) set by the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA). Client procurement advisers around the world increasingly are looking for a CMS stamp on agencies selected as global suppliers, and national PR agency associations in Europe, Asia, and Africa are following the UK's lead in setting the bar high.

Another reason why global PR work will grow in London at New York's expense: There are a lot fewer Americans here. I'd know - I am one. For us Yanks, thinking about things differently than you do in the US is, well, un-American. But for communicators looking to connect with communities in the rest of the world, an un-American perspective is what's needed. They get it in London.

It does have its flaws. London is expensive, especially with today's exchange rate, and PR pros here seem slower to embrace new technology. The subway is not air-conditioned, and, let's be honest, Brits can be a bit snooty. But overall, London has what global PR buyers demand: convenience, creativity, language, well-managed firms, and a truly global perspective.

David Gallagher is CEO of Ketchum in London and also chairs the international committee of the UK Public Relations Consultants Association.