

# Observer's 2017 PR Power 50

By Michael Kaminer and John Bonazzo · 12/13/17 8:00am



As industry leaders weighed in for this year's PR Power 50, a kind of consensus emerged about 2017.

"Wild," said James Brodsky, founder and CEO of Sharp Communications.

"Freaky," said APCO Worldwide leader Nelson Fernandez.

"Tough," said Havas PR honcho Marian Salzman.

"Very interesting," Kekst head Jeremy Fielding said.

At almost every firm Observer surveyed, unfettered optimism of previous years has given way to a kind of nervous energy. On the one hand, clients have never needed agencies more. Brands are navigating whiplash uncertainty, hall-of-mirrors politics and whack-a-mole news cycles. They want help.

"The key question now is what and when to communicate," Fernandez said. "Will speaking out on issues affect your employees? How do you engage all of your stakeholders once you take a position on a big issue? These are very challenging times."

Fielding agreed. "Because of the political and economic environment, it's not just traditional issues management," he said. "The questions are harder and narrower. It's, 'I don't know where antitrust is going,' or 'I don't know where trade policy is going.'"

While jitters have benefited the bottom line at some firms, anxious clients also make for very anxious agencies. "Client stability has never been as fragile as I'm seeing it now," said Matt Rizzetta, founder and CEO of N6A. "Uncertainty reigns, and budgets reflect it. Clients used to want a six-month plan. That's a luxury we don't have anymore."

Even a giant like Havas PR is facing a new reality of shorter timelines and higher expectations. "It's smaller budgets and more project work," Salzman said. "And there's huge anxiety over getting on Trump's radar. Clients don't want that distraction. Even in cause marketing, the big question is how to keep it from getting politicized."

Clients are also demanding new levels of intelligence, expertise and insights from agencies; smart people have never been more in demand, and clients are leaning on top agency leaders—not just teams—for guidance. "Clients definitely want top-level counsel now," Fielding said, "especially with the kinds of clients we represent, where there's a lot of intersection with Washington."

Nor is it enough to just understand media strategy anymore. “What’s crucial is understanding how issues affect individual industries, whether it’s NAFTA or the Trans-Pacific Partnership or whatever,” said Doug Hesney, who heads the financial and professional-services practice at Makovsky. “Many of our clients are in highly regulated industries.”

As a result, grown-ups are back in style in PR—even in less fraught areas like lifestyle. “The expertise is swinging back from youth and tech,” said PR guru Susan Magrino, owner of the eponymous agency. “Clients like our expertise. After 25 years in business, the respect is there. We just have to keep proving we’re not afraid of change.”

A quick note about the rankings: It’s said every year but bears repeating that the Observer’s PR Power 50 isn’t based on revenue, headcount or awards—though they can’t hurt. Instead, we look at influence. What kind of year did an agency have? What kinds of clients came aboard? Who got hired? What home-run campaigns did the firm execute? Was it part of bigger conversations about issues and ideas?

Like the industry itself, the Power 50 is about change, and we’re eager for your feedback on this year’s choices.