

In an Economic Downturn — Maintain the Buzz! Turn up the Volume with Effective PR

By Linda J Herrick

In recent months the news has been full of stories about the current economic downturn. Topics range from the hopeful, "*Resale Home Market on the Upswing*," to the dour, "*Consumer Confidence Weakest Since 2003*." It's no wonder that we are looking toward the day when we finally hit the bottom and can start climbing again. Regardless of predictions, the reality is that businesses must keep their names in front of their stakeholders, but have fewer dollars with which to do it. The question is: How do you continue to generate buzz in a tightened economy? The answer is simple: Effective use of public relations.

Successful businesses have solid marketing plans. Successful marketing plans include a mix of tools strategically designed to maximize message exposure to a variety of audiences. The implementation of a well-developed PR plan in the mix is a prudent and cost-effective way to reach multiple audiences and continue to generate buzz while waiting for the good times to return.

According to *The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR* by marketing professional Al Reis and his daughter Laura, marketing has turned a corner. The authors predict that the future will see PR setting the strategic direction for the brand, and advertising will follow. Organizations should distinguish themselves by creatively using news events, publications, community relations, and social investments — in other words by effectively using PR. During this period of economic slowdown, begin or continue establishing your brand using effective PR, then follow with advertising when there are more dollars available.

Where to begin? Every organization has stories to tell which are not necessarily focused on products or services. Find them and make them compelling. If you can link your stories to current issues, you will have better chance of catching the attention of the media. What "green" strategies are you using? What is your organization doing to keep employees on the payroll during the recession? What are employees doing to help each other in these difficult times? What about social responsibility? What is your organization doing to reduce obesity and encourage fitness? Are you minimizing trips to the office to save gas? The list goes on and on. Write it down and get it out there. Your stories will maintain the buzz because people love to hear them.

Once your stories are written, incorporate key words into the headlines in order to optimize search engine success. Put them on your website and send them out to targeted media outlets. The amazing Internet will be your friend as people will be able to find you rather than vice versa.

Another benefit to effective PR is the trust factor. In an age when we are inundated with messages, advertising doesn't always resonate with the consumer. Consider this: When you read an article touting products or services, do you peek at the top to see if the disclaimer "advertisement" is included? And if it is, do you quickly discount its claims? Ah, but if the article is genuinely written from a third-party perspective do you then think, "Hey, this must be a great product?" Point made. Effective PR creates a credible buzz which reaches multiple audiences and solidifies a brand.

Public relations should always occupy a hefty chunk of the marketing pie. Achieving your marketing goals relies not only on consumers, but also on the many key audiences who have a stake in your brand. In an economic slowdown, turning up the volume on public relations will help maintain awareness of your product or service in the marketplace.

At December's Economic Outlook Luncheon, Marshall Vest, director of the Economic Business Research Center at The University of Arizona said we shouldn't expect to begin emerging from the current miasma until mid-2009. Until then turn up the volume and solidify your brand with effective PR strategies. When the good times return you will find yourself at the top because you did, and you'll surely continue to include the successful PR plan that pulled you through.