

PR WEEK Quotes Connected PR in this great article on surviving the recession...

## Barely a day goes by without another recession headline. Both in-house teams and agencies are feeling the pinch, but there are some basic rules that can help. **Cathy Wallace** asks leading industry figures for survival tips

### 1 Get creative

Do not be afraid to embrace what seems like drastic change if it makes sense for your business. Digital comms agency Onshore PR recently upped and left London - taking London clients with it - and set up shop in the West Country where overheads are cheaper, but modern technology can offer 'London quality at Cornwall prices', argues co-founder Simon Whittam. 'Office costs are low and we can service clients properly without having to take on more than we can manage just to balance the books.'

If you have been late to embrace the digital revolution, now is the time to rectify that. As clients start to demand not only that they appear in the papers and on TV but also high on Google News, YouTube and Facebook, those PR agencies that survive this recession will be the ones well equipped to integrate traditional and new media in their campaigns.

'Outsourcing to IT wizards, as has been the case, is only a gap-filler,' says Richard Milton, co-founder of The PR Training Centre. 'Agency staff need online digital PR skills for survival.'

Jo Jamieson, regional director at Berkeley PR, adds: 'Exploit the opportunities that social media provide. Give staff time to play with new technologies and encourage them to think about how they can use them to sell online PR services to existing and new clients.'

### 2 Go back to basics

At a time when PR is in danger of being classified as a luxury, getting the basics right can help ensure survival. It sounds obvious, but make sure you are delivering what you promise. 'Take a critical look at the programmes and campaigns you are delivering,' suggests Kirsty Leighton, vice president and global head of client development at Waggener Edstrom. 'At a time

when client bottom-lines are going to be under even more scrutiny, PR consultancies have to ask themselves if they are actually solving the business problem.'

In-house teams need to make sure they are promoting themselves to the full to avoid being cut as companies look to squeeze budgets. Hayley Wilson, senior press officer for charity the National Day Nurseries Association, says: 'We always make sure our achievements are highlighted to management, staff and our board and everyone receives regular reports showing the return on investment.' She adds that giving other departments a good service and sound advice helps highlight the comms teams' contribution.

David Martin, senior comms officer at building consultants Tuffin Ferraby Taylor, says in-house teams should play to their strengths. 'If you can show you understand what is going to help keep the business afloat and that your activity can generate awareness and income in these areas, you are going to be seen as a valuable tool.'

While big-budget campaigns may become less popular, there will always be a need for bread-and-butter PR. Cathy Bramley, MD of Apples & Pears Marketing, says her agency has introduced a basic press office service called Core. 'We are hoping this will bring us clients for whom our normal minimum retainer is prohibitive,' she says. The service provides a simple press office function without long contracts and Bramley hopes it will encourage local businesses to invest in PR without committing to a large annual budget.

### 3 People matter

To be competitive, you need the best people. Even if your agency has just made cuts, it is important the staff you

keep are not only the best at what they do, but know they are in the right place. This means finding the time and money, even in these pressured circumstances, to train and motivate them.

'When the tide turns, we will need high-quality, motivated staff,' says Robyn Glynne-Percy, MD of Scottish agency Profile Plus. 'We are pruning our training budget but we are not cutting it entirely.'

Do not be tempted to stop developing staff to cut costs, and do not assume the job market has dried up so staff will not look elsewhere. The account executives and managers you have now are the directors of the future, and if you do not invest in them, another company will.

Lisa Brace, a senior account executive at Sussex-based tech agency Wildwood PR, has just returned from a trade show in Amsterdam that she attended with her bosses. 'All the team go to these events, whether abroad or closer to home, because it is part of the personal development policy Wildwood has for us,' she says. 'At a time when many companies are not advertising for new staff, it can be tough to progress our careers, but knowing we are gaining skills and the incentive of promotion is something that can keep us aiming high.'

Keep morale up. Gloomy staff do not produce their best work. But you can unite them in the goal of beating the common enemy. 'Develop a siege mentality with your people - give them the feeling they are in the best place and you are looking out for them,' says Octopus MD Jon Lonsdale.

Mitchell Kaye, MD of Mischief PR, says: 'Fear stops people doing their best work so try to maintain the best possible environment for people to be positive and ambitious, irrespective of the world outside. Do not allow the recession to become an excuse for anything, or a barrier to hitting high standards.'

## 4 Be flexible

Just because you have always done it that way, it is not necessarily the right way. Take a look at your working practices and see where you can afford to give a little.

Kate McFerran, associate director at MS&L, advises being flexible with contracts. You do not have to always push for the retainer. 'Project work continues to become more popular,' she says.

If you are prepared to be flexible yourself, others might negotiate with you as well. 'Reduce overheads by renegotiating supplier contracts,' suggests McFerran. Remember they will be keen to keep your custom, so push for a better deal.

Kristin Syltevik, co-founder of tech agency Hotwire, which survived the dot-com burst, warns clients will be looking for PR agencies that can do more work, with less resources.

'Make sure all your staff have the industry-specific knowledge to give companies the confidence to invest in them,' she says.

Colette Hill, chairman of workplace comms consultancy CHA, says PR agencies have to take a good hard look at what their clients actually want.

'Talk to them, even if they say they are happy with what you currently offer. Look for opportunities and adapt fast. Do not be trapped by your back catalogue.'

In-house comms teams can also be more flexible with their measurement of success. Suzanne Stevenson, press and PR manager at disability charity Scope, says: 'It is not all about national media coverage; look at local and regional press and take your message directly to local communities.'

Look for creative ways to make headlines - Stevenson says PR activity around Scope's charity shops has made full use of the increasing 'make do and mend' mentality.

Tabitha Aldrich-Smith, director of comms at Whitbread, says: 'If we are well networked we can help our colleagues by acting as a "radar" and keeping people up to date with the latest news of what is happening out there in our markets.'

Anna Shipley, director of comms at Nokia, says: 'It is easy for both in-house and agency teams to miss opportunities by sticking to the same approach they may have taken eight months ago. Seeing change as a springboard for new approaches will be important.'

## 5 Maintain a British stiff upper lip

Remember the recession is not just a problem, it is a challenge. Lonsdale rallies: 'It is going to be a strange year, but a fun one. A bit of adversity now and again is a good thing.'

Look for the positives in your situation - if you are part of a big PR agency or group of agencies, chances are you are heavy-weight enough to weather the storm. And if you are small, there is also plenty to smile about. 'Being a boutique agency can be a real advantage during a recession as we are quick to adapt and offer a flexibility some of the larger agencies cannot,' says Jodie Welton, co-founder of Connected PR.

There may even be advantages to being a UK agency in a recession. Brace says: 'Currency fluctuations make employing a UK agency very attractive, so we are working hard promoting ourselves to European and US clients keen to grow in the UK.'

Kaye says: 'The best way to beat a recession is to do fantastic work, add value in every area of client life, understand the pressure clients are under and provide solutions to problems without being asked. I buy lots of sweets too.' ♦



**We always make sure our achievements are highlighted to management**

Hayley Wilson Senior press officer, National Day Nurseries Association



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Colette Hill Chairman CHA