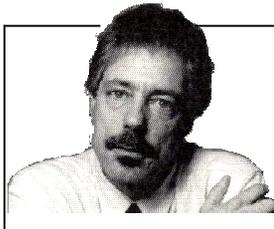


When times call for marketing on a budget

Offering the best products or services doesn't guarantee business success. This simple statement may be understood by some, but it's worth emphasizing for the many entrepreneurs and business decision-makers wondering what to do about sagging sales and plunging revenue.

It's particularly important during an economic slowdown when marketing budgets are shrinking faster than cashmere sweaters on spin cycle. The fact is, be it a bull or a bear market, success of a business depends upon smart marketing.

In fact, it's periods of economic uncertainty that offer real opportunity and value for smart marketers. More



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than a few businesses have pulled away from the pack during lean times when competitors have all but disappeared from the public eye.

This is not to say that marketing departments should proceed in an atmosphere of business-as-usual. The reality is,

everyone is feeling the economic pinch, and advertising and public relations budgets are being cut. The trick is to implement a program that reduces waste and maximizes results.

A shoestring budget may result in sacrifices, but it should give savvy PR professionals the tools they need to raise a company's visibility, help

increase sales and advance the business objective of establishing market leadership.

Here are a few suggestions:

For starters, now is the perfect time to focus. When money isn't an issue, marketing departments often use a shotgun approach to advertising and public relations. The strategy is to get the message out any way possible and hope it sticks. But now it's time to narrow focus to one or two specific target audiences. Determine who your best prospects are and direct all communications to those narrow groups.

Next, ensure that your messages are on track. Today's market dictates that messages be clear and focused. In general there should be no more than three key messages that your company (or division) is espousing at any one time. They should explain what benefits your products or services provide; what problems your company solves. Consider what would be more effective today: the message that says, "We're the broadband leader for today's e-business," or "we guarantee faster e-mail delivery."

Determining the right messages doesn't have to be a budget buster either. While costly research may be out of the question for now, there are less expensive alternatives. I recommend my clients conduct periodic strategy summits – a hands-on workshop used to review current market issues, company positioning and the current competitive climate.

While PR usually takes the lead in strategy summits, it's well worth having advertising and other marketing

10 STEPS TO EFFECTIVE SHOESTRING PR

1. **Focus communications efforts on 1 or 2 key audiences**
2. **Target repeat customers rather than new ones**
3. **Ensure your messages are on track**
4. **Highlight no more than 3 key messages**
5. **Communicate product and service benefits**
6. **Coordinate PR efforts with other marketing arms**
7. **Narrow media targets to the most import for your audience**
8. **Leverage the Internet**
9. **Eliminate low ROI tactics**
10. **Reduce unnecessary administrative and reporting activities**

professionals attend as well. Too often, a company's advertising messages differ from its public relations messages. And these differ from what the salespeople are saying to customers. One of the most effective ways of increasing marketing ROI is to make sure that all arms of marketing are working together toward a common goal.

Public relations efforts should be as focused as your messaging. Instead of blasting out press releases to anyone that might be interested, develop a campaign that aims at two or three of the most important media contacts for your industry. This focused approach allows PR to quickly build the relationships needed to get fast results. With well-crafted messages aimed at appropriate targets, coverage is all but guaranteed.

Magazines, newspapers and broadcast media aren't the only way to get your message out today. The Internet can serve as a direct link between your company and its target audience. Releases placed on a wire service are often picked up by various browsers and in turn, by industry-specific web sites looking to provide the latest news. The fact that it shows up on the Internet not only helps you reach your audience, but its mere appearance "in print" helps

legitimize its significance. While this fact may poke at the ulcers of editors use to deciding what is and is not newsworthy, the fact is the Internet has given companies a chance to communicate messages that might have otherwise been squelched.

There are a number of "tricks" you can use to increase the chances of your press release being picked up by top browsers. For instance, it helps to include your industry focus rather than just a product name in the headline. Someone surfing the web to find a new printer is more likely to see an announcement with the headlines "ACME INTRODUCES FASTEST INKJET PRINTER," than one that says "ACME INTRODUCES THE INKITUP 5000."

There are a number of standard PR activities that make sense when resources permit but are worth questioning during leaner times. Editorial calendars for instance, alert PR professionals to stories planned in advance by magazines. While they may offer clues to possible coverage opportunities, the listings are usually vague and require a lot of time and effort to flush out the worthwhile leads. The resulting ROI is very small. I often suggest to cost-conscious clients that editorial calendar activities be limited to key publications

and only those listings that are clearly appropriate for the company's current messaging campaign. While you may miss some minor opportunities, your overall program will not suffer and your budget can be used more effectively elsewhere.

A lot of companies also spend large portions of their marketing budget on administrative activities. If you are using an outside agency, I strongly recommend reviewing and discussing your current reporting procedures. Every status report, update e-mail, coverage-tracking program and clip analysis takes time and costs money. While many of these activities may have become ingrained in day-to-day procedures, they oftentimes get out of control. If your agency's weekly status reports lay in an unread stack on top of your file cabinet, perhaps they are not as valuable as you had hoped. A good agency would rather spend time getting results than talking about them.

The bottom line is that there are some real things you can do to reduce your marketing budget and still be effective. Eliminating marketing all together is probably not the smartest move. Leave that for your competition and then take advantage of the opportunities their silence provides.

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