



COMMUNICATION TACTICS FOR HARD TIMES

Dear Sandy,

Not finding themselves immune to the pressures of a troubled economy, many public agencies have less staff than a year ago - and fewer communication dollars than ever to keep stakeholders sufficiently informed. The best advice for these organizations: Don't Stop Talking! Many experts will tell you that hard times call more than ever for staying in touch to protect hard-won community equity and advance issues and projects. So what to do? Here are seven easy pieces:

1. **Prioritize the Topics:** What are the most critical issues facing your customers in 2010? Call out the more pedestrian communication and create a "Must Do" list that protects your reputation and advance critical projects.
2. **Leverage the Inexpensive:** Web content and updates and some social media represent less expensive communication than the printed pieces. Promote your web address at every turn. Send an inexpensive postcard to announce important new content - rather than printing and mailing more complicated and costly collateral.
3. **E-mail. No Postage Required:** Once set up, it is quicker, cheaper and highly effective (as long as you adopt the basic tenets of opt-in and anti-spam).
4. **Balance In-House and Out-of-House:** Having internal staff versus a public relations agency isn't a one-or-the-other proposition. Internal staff, with benefits, often costs more. But one valuable staffer - or even a half of one - can save time and money with familiarity of communication programs and "how we do things." On the other hand, a good agency that can be called on only when needed can provide a critical "on-call" resource when staff levels are low or when special expertise is required.
5. **Part with the Press Release:** If you are still reproducing and mailing press releases, stop it! Almost all media outlets not only accept releases embedded in email but prefer them. Also, be smart about what you send. Editors are working with less staff and their time is limited.
6. **Slay a Sacred Cow:** Are you spending money doing things because "that's what we've always done?" Do you do an expensive annual publication that almost no one reads? Can you post it online instead? Can you discontinue or limit an expensive, four-color magazine? Is that "giveaway" calendar really useful? Drive your stakeholders to your website instead.
7. **Focus on Customer Benefit:** Since we are in a recession, be part of the solution, regularly offering tips on cost reduction for your product. Some messages bear repeating frequently, and that costs almost nothing.

A quick Google search reflected not one communication expert that recommends eliminating communication in a pinch. Rather, ramp up efficiency and focus on what's most important, choosing quality over quantity.

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