

Smart Communication Strategies in a Down Economy

Edited by
Neil Sagebiel

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Introduction

This report was born when I decided to pose a question to a slice of my network on LinkedIn: *What are smart communication strategies in a down economy?*

The question was purposely broad to allow the variety of marketing, public relations and communications professionals in my network to answer from their diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Not surprisingly, the answers were diverse and thoughtful.

I hope the following articles and mini essays are helpful to you as you consider ways to have a meaningful dialogue with your customers, clients, prospects and others. And many thanks to all who contributed!

What do you say? I'd like to hear from you for future editions of this report. Again, the question: *What are smart communication strategies in a down economy?*

Please send your answer and comments to: neilsagebiel@gmail.com

About Neil Sagebiel

Neil Sagebiel (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/neilsagebiel>) is a freelance writer and blogger who specializes in B2B marketing communications and university fundraising and writes extensively about professional golf. Neil edits two blogs: HEADLINES FROM FLOYD (<http://headlinesfromfloyd.com>) and ARMCHAIR GOLF BLOG (<http://armchairgolfblog.blogspot.com>), a top independent golf blog.

How to Employ Online Tactics

Contributed by: Danny Flamberg

You don't have to be a member of the Federal Reserve Board to know that marketers are hunkering down and selecting only the fastest and cheapest ways to acquire and retain customers as budgets evaporate. Online tactics offer low cost/high yield options. Here are a few things to consider before embracing these tactics.

Blogging. The human face of corporations and businesses doesn't matter without a point of view. You've got to get customers to click, read and believe. This demands content that's more textured than the party line sufficient to bring them back, buy something or talk up your brand.

SEO. Seven of 10 searchers click on the natural results first. But if you're not on the first page you're toast. Getting to the first page requires huge investments of skill, tools and dedicated players. This is a good investment bet though improvement is incremental and sometimes glacial due to intense competition and almost constant gaming by both search engines and optimizers.

PPC. Pay-per-click search advertising is the fastest and easiest thing you can do. With even modest budgets you can incrementally improve traffic and results. Even from a standing start PPC advertising can quickly have a positive ROI on your business.

Social Networking. This is the most hyped and least understood marketing tool. Reaching out to large numbers of customers linked to each other in social forums using the images, language and customs they expect and like makes good sense. Some brands have amassed large numbers of "friends," others have distributed information and coupons, prompted interaction and feedback, run contests, collected data and even sold some merchandise. At

relatively modest costs, social networks are a great experimental tool and marketing test lab.

Email. In spite of widespread hatred of SPAM and the near ubiquitous deployment of increasingly sophisticated spam filters, outbound opt-in email is the most cost-effective and reliable tool you can use. Email works. Determinants of success are a clean opt-in list, a credible FROM line, a motivating SUBJ line with an actionable offer inside. Shorter copy with minimal graphics and clearly marked calls to action work best. Bet the farm on email.

Affiliate Marketing. This approach offers the prospect of everyone helping everyone else. Though in reality it's about finding the right balance between greed and self-interest. The 80/20 rule applies – a minority of sites will yield the biggest payoffs. Setting up an effective affiliate network takes at least 90 days and requires dedicated staff and expertise. If you start now, it might begin to pay out in 2009.

Danny Flamberg (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/dannyflamberg>) is a Managing Partner at Booster Rocket. The above article is an excerpt from his blog, Manhattan Marketing Maven.

Take Relationships to Next Level

Contributed by: Heshha Patel

When times are rough, it becomes even more important to take relationship management between you (the company) and your customer to the next level. Personalize your interaction by picking up the phone, talking to your customers and find out first hand how the economy is playing a part in their business and how you can be there to help!

Holding webinars can be an effective way to market to current and prospective customers on a low-key budget as they eliminate travel, accommodations and various other expenses.

Targeted email marketing to opt-in lists is another economical way to communicate with current and potential clients. Provide as much value as possible by sharing knowledge and expertise, such as whitepapers, case studies, success stories, articles and more.

Heshha Patel (<http://www.linkedin.com/pub/4/422/676>) is a Marketing Manager at UT Starcom.

7 Strategies for an Economic Downturn

Contributed by: Maurine Jeude

As Euripides said, "There is in the worst of fortune the best of chances for a happy change."

So how do we navigate the current turbulent waters and manage to emerge from the depths fitter and stronger and ready to take advantage of the chances we created? A recession or slowdown is the best time to step up your marketing efforts – at least in quality, if not quantity – and grow market share.

Here are the communication and marketing strategies I would embrace in an economic downturn:

1. Be heard/increase your share of voice. Many have gone silent or become very quiet in this downturn. If you have to pull back, do so less than your competitors, but remain heard – even a soft voice in a quiet room gets noticed! There is plenty of empirical data that shows share of voice and perception of a brand as having quality are directly related. And when you do put yourself out there, consider taking a less sober tone of voice – the nation is mired in economic doom and gloom; bring some levity to the conversation. It will be appreciated!

2. Look for the opportunity. One of the first behaviors in a downturn is being more selective in the brands one chooses. People may be saving in some areas to spend more in others. Take a step back and see if you can compete in that arena. And given that your customers are seeking value, it is a great time to either reinforce your current brand values or give them new or additional reasons that justify the brand/store choice in the first place.

3. Focus on your current customers and use them to make new ones. Consumers behave differently during slowdowns. They want to know that you care about those things that are important to them. Ask. And don't

forget the most important question of all: Would you recommend us to a friend or colleague? Then give them a reason to – hold a workshop, start a newsletter, offer a free sample or coupon for a friend and enable your best customers to promote you. Get creative! Enable your sales staff to flex to customer needs. Offering value and security is the most useful arsenal when consumers are trying to stretch their budgets.

4. Keep talking. If you don't have a customer list, start one. Capture both a home and email address and ask them if they want to be notified of upcoming events and sales.

5. Stay visible. Invest in ad search so your company's name comes up at the top of the search engine listings when consumers are looking for a place to buy. This is an inexpensive way to attract new customers and keep top of mind with current ones, even when you don't have a robust Web site. You can do this yourself or work with the experts.

6. Spend smarter to offset spending less. In every downturn, there are market segments that are more resilient or will grow faster than others. These may be segments you're already selling to, but haven't really focused on; or they could be emerging segments that will provide new opportunities to grow your company. At the same time, you can reduce your spending on segments that get hit the hardest during downturns. Ask your media providers how to best reach those customers, starting locally, through zoned products, targeted mailings and online offerings. And utilize their free services around media planning, ad design and market research.

7. Resist the temptation to cut prices. Unless you are a discounter, price reductions should be truly strategic, i.e. built around a one-time event to drive traffic. Price cutting may lead to an ongoing expectation and devalue your brand equity when good times come round again.

When conditions do improve, you will be uniquely positioned to grow and

expand your business at the expense of your competitors who chose to go silent.

Maurine Jeude (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/mjeude>) is a Media and Marketing Research Manager at The Seattle Times Company.

Ask People What They Want

Contributed by: Jeff Cornett

Social networking, relevant conversations and smart PR.

Roll-up marketing instead of push down. Asking people what they want, creating conversations about that and clearly understanding what the “it” is and then delivering “it” makes sense. It would also seem to be most efficient.

I’ve spent a lot of time in the past two years working to understand how to better merge the experience that I’ve gained overall from PR to experiential to answer that question about “what are smart communication strategies in a down economy?”

Find the information flow, the need to understand or get news and stay close to that source. Chances are, at the top of the pile of strategies, that’s where I would start.

Jeff Cornett (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/icreatebuzz>) is a Managing Partner at icreatebuzz.

5 Marketing Musts During a Recession

Contributed by: Drew McLellan

I understand the lure of just hunkering down and waiting out the economic lull. And I know you're probably tired of hearing this, but if you are smart this is a huge opportunity for you to capture market share and solidify your position in the marketplace.

Please do not sit this one out. And I'm not even going to tell you not to cut prices or cut your budget, because we've beat that horse to death!

110% consistency: The buyers are already jumpy. Don't give them any reason to mistrust or doubt you. Live and breathe your brand integrity. Don't do or say anything that contradicts your brand.

Tactics:

- Review your brand values with each and every employee
- Refresh your website to put your brand promise front and center
- Ask your employees for ideas on how to bring your brand to life. Pay \$50 for every idea used. Make that very public knowledge

Love on your current customers: They're the most likely to buy again and they are also most likely the audience you've ignored. Now is the time to appreciate them, remind them why they trusted you in the first place and over-service them.

Tactics:

- Do a customer only mailing, spotlighting some of your best offerings at their best prices
- Hold a customer appreciation party and say "thank you" repeatedly
- Offer a pre-payment discount (you get cash up front and their commitment to follow through)

Give it away: Demonstrate to the world that you believe in abundance by giving away some of your product or services to a worthy non-profit. But don't do a drive by. Partner with them for the long haul and work your PR magic.

Tactics:

- Give your employees a voice in which charity you partner with
- Be smart – choose a charity that has an influential board of directors and make a point of being at those meetings to share your expertise
- Trade your products or services for an event sponsorship so you get publicity for your efforts

Listen, respond, repeat: Now is not the time to be ignoring the marketplace. You need to be listening to your customers, your competitor's customers and anyone else who is out there talking about your industry.

Tactics:

- Do a customer survey (while you are at it, do a past customer survey)
- Set up Google alerts
- Jump into conversations about your industry and offer value

Use content marketing: You're good at what you do. You want your prospects and customers to be successful. Why not position yourself as the expert by sharing your expertise?

Tactics:

- Create an e-newsletter (don't start it if you aren't going to consistently create/deliver it)
- Build a robust How To series for your website
- Launch a business blog (again...don't start it if you aren't serious about keeping at it)

Drew McLellan (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/drewmclellan>) is Top Dog at McLellan Marketing Group.

Making More Connections

Contributed by: Sharon Current

In the private education sector, we're identifying more ways to communicate and engage with all our constituent groups more frequently.

We're using multiple mediums to share stories about what's happening on campus or share our expertise about early adolescent education. We're looking for more opportunities to bring audiences on campus for performances and speakers, or to gather them together for social events to reconnect and reminisce.

We're trying to add value to and fine-tune every touch point. In all our communications endeavors, we're making it our focus to foster connections – whether attracting, retaining, building, growing, maximizing, and/or maintaining connections.

Sharon Current (<http://www.linkedin.com/pub/0/b72/41>) is Director of Development and Marketing at Billings Middle School.

Optimize Message at Point of Sale

Contributed by: Mel Bryant

In a down economy, take a look at optimizing your message at the Point of Sale. It's less expensive to execute than many other forms of media, yet has the potential to interrupt buyers and divert their attention to the advantages of your product during the moment when they are making their purchasing decision.

Mel Bryant (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/melbryant>) is Group Creative Director at Price Weber.

5 Smart Strategies in a Down Economy

Contributed by: David Hazeltine

1. Stand Out in the Mail – Take advantage of the lower volume of direct mail, and put your best foot forward with a high-end, very targeted, cross-media mail campaign – perhaps including a variable-data mail piece, driving recipients to a PURL site, and with an email and/or direct mail follow-up.

2. Work Your Phones – Call your customers and clients (both active and inactive) and your prospects to remind them that “we are all in the same boat,” and that you will work with them to help them – by working for reduced fees and margins, offer them free shipping, buy-one-get-ones, etc.

3. Push “Green” Newsletters – Use a “News Flash” email to announce that you’ve decided that these times are the best times for you to commit to move as many of your print newsletter subscribers/prospective subscribers to the e-version of your newsletter. Since you NEED to save money and WANT to save trees and the environment. People will be receptive, and will bite on your offer, as they will value your candor – and ingenuity!

4. Implement a No-Conference Payback Policy – Again, be honest and inform your customers and clients that the economy has forced you to cut back on exhibiting and attending trade show, conference, and seminar fees, etc. – and the travel and promotion costs associated with them. And perhaps offer to “invest” a portion of these savings in your relationship with them – by holding staff training with lunch events at their offices, doing a free “audit” of their collateral, communications materials, website and more. Additionally, you could offer to fly them to your office/plant/facility, and treat them special with a hotel room, seminar, training, and, of course, meals!

5. Commit to “Frequent Forwarding” – Clients and customers love it when you send/share a casual “thinking of you” article via email – or even as a

tear-sheet or photocopy via snail mail. Start doing this regularly for a while, offering articles on how they can do their jobs better – e.g. tips on managing a reduced staff and/or budget, money-saving mail and web marketing techniques, picking the best seminars to attend and more. They'll appreciate both your thoughts of them and your help.

David Hazeltine (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/yellowfindirecthazeltine>) is CEO of Yellowfin Direct Marketing.

Honest Two-Way Communication

Contributed by: Derek Highley

Companies that will devote time to building honest relationships with customers – past, present and future – will be the ones that realize the most success, not only during these difficult economic times but also down the road.

Consumers are tired of the communication clutter and basically being yelled at through “interruption marketing” by companies fighting for attention. By taking advantage of the available technology, honest two-way communication is now easier than ever.

Companies need to focus on making their website the hub of all their communication with customers, invite two-way communication through their website via surveys, forums, company communities and more.

Consumers have become very savvy, and companies that can give through their communication with their customer base will be the ones that will receive the most in return.

Derek Highley (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/derekhigley>) is a Managing Partner at Global Golf Marketing.

Dear Business Person

Contributed by: Dick Paetzke

It's nasty out there. Things are tight and some changes and sacrifice are in order.

But slow up! Too often businesses seeking to deal with a tight economy too quickly choose to chop marketing expenditures as though they were frills.

Of course, some are and it's a good idea to look at any business area where you can trim fat. But unnecessarily handicapping your ability to make sales, move goods and hold onto your market share by blind cost cutting makes about as much sense as a shoe manufacturer selling off his shoe making equipment to reduce the cost of doing business.

Anybody can succeed at reducing cost by reducing business. It's far better to reduce the cost of your business's marketing component by increasing its efficiency and productivity.

One often overlooked way is to improve the quality and experience level of the people you hire to create and execute your marketing communications. *That includes you.* More and more senior marketing directors are making do with less and less skilled help. Some are their company's chief creative strategist and one-man or one-woman marcom department. Others are relying on outside advertising agencies that are ever more frequently staffed with junior creative people who are hip and trendy but essentially inexperienced in producing business results or even understandable communications.

(Want proof? Did you watch all the incomprehensible commercials on the Super Bowl? Multi-million dollar commercials for companies whose names or even products you could not remember at the end of the game? Or wonderfully entertaining commercials that simply entertained and nothing else. Thank you, Mr. Advertiser, that's really nice of you.)

The advertisers who put up the big bucks for these essentially non-productive efforts are paying the high price of immature talent and raw inexperience in the art of persuasion. And it doesn't just take its toll in the television medium, which few companies can afford in the first place. It happens in the creation and production of outdoor boards, brochures, company case histories or white papers, trade magazine advertising, direct mail, website content and design, radio commercials, promotional development, channel merchandising and a 1,001 other places.

It particularly happens in branding efforts where design firms whose expertise is design, and who may totally lack the kind of branded product marketing experience that created success for a Procter & Gamble, Hallmark, or Johnson & Johnson, think that everything boils down to how you look, not how well you understand the hearts and minds, fears, needs, and wants of the people your product or capability will serve.

That understanding lies at the heart of the value of experienced creative people. And your woods are probably full of them. Only they probably aren't where you've been looking, in advertising agencies, design firms, or PR companies.

Oh, they used to be there; that's where they've gained their experience (at someone else's expense). But now they've graduated or been early-retired out because they'd become too expensive or were "war surplus" after a merger.

Many would be happy to put on an old hat and help you breathe new life and success into your marketing communications, while you benefited from brilliance, insight, and focused energy they are tired of wasting on golf, BS-ing with old colleagues in coffee shops, or catching up on their reading.

Dick Paetzke (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/dickpaetzke>) is the owner of Dick Paetzke Creative Directions.

Email Marketing Is Recession Proof

Contributed by: Stephanie Miller

Now more than ever, email marketing is a smart strategy – low cost, high ROI. The favorite formula of direct marketers everywhere. It's recession proof!

However, there is a potential risk. Because email is so powerful and inexpensive, many marketers send very frequently. "If one email is good, then 10 must be great!" is the logic. It's faulty logic.

There are very real risks to over-mailing. Subscriber fatigue, higher unsubscribes, list churn, and higher complaints (*clicking on the Report Spam button), which reduces inbox delivery and can cause serious damage to your ability to reach subscriber inboxes.

So the smart strategy is to use email to create great subscriber experiences, and to synch it with your social network, blogging, search, postal mail and catalog strategies in order to communicate via relevant content, build community and drive commerce (the three C's of successful email marketing).

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