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### Countering a Tough Economy: Three Steps PR Must Take to Avoid Knee-Jerk Budget Cuts



By Scott Severson, President, ARAnet

If you're at all like me, you have a sense of apprehension when you log on to your computer each morning to scan the latest economic news. The headlines tend to shift between horrific and pessimistic. For months, we've been bombarded with plummeting stock market numbers, federal bail-outs and uneasy projections for the short- and long-term stability of the economy.

As a marketer, the negative headlines inform my decisions on a daily basis. As I navigate the spirited debates I've had both internally and with industry colleagues, I keep coming back to a central theme: Why are we so quick to cut back on budgets during tough economic times? My mind races back to the presidential debates—and the competing notions of using a scalpel or a hatchet to cut the national budget. Many of my peers within the industry are using one or the other on their budgets—and have raced to start cutting without always considering the alternatives.

Let's put the sharp instruments back in the drawer and try to analyze instead of just react. I'm not suggesting that we should blindly continue tactics that aren't working. Some cutting may be necessary. But it shouldn't be driven by a sense of panic. I think it's imperative that we take a break from the doom and gloom of the nightly news, take a deep breath and calmly evaluate our options.

Remember, our collective goal is to meet our marketing, public affairs and reputation management objectives. We need to reevaluate all of our tactics and boost the effectiveness of the dollars we're already spending. Inherent to this goal is making sure that our efforts deliver meaningful results. Measuring and achieving strong ROI throughout our campaigns makes it much easier to justify keeping them funded. It's as simple as that.

So where do we start? Here are the three steps I recommend:

**1. Get out the ruler.** I know that the value of measurement is ingrained in each of us. But with today's economic climate, measurement has been elevated from important to critical. Measuring your tactics—and objectively acknowledging which ones are delivering ROI—is the first step you should take. Use the data wisely to shift resources to the tactics that are delivering the best outcomes. Meaningful results will resonate with clients and management. Simply doing more of what's working and less of what's not might be the key to avoid budget cuts.

Fortunately, today's tactics are more measurable than ever. You'll have plenty of data to work with. The key is not to get overwhelmed by your metrics and find yourself in the mode of "analysis paralysis." Gravitate towards data that is actionable, and that allows you to have an immediate impact on your existing campaign.

**2. Be calm—but quick.** While I'm generally advocating a calm mindset during this down economy, I'm also bullish on moving quickly when necessary. After you've reviewed your campaigns and focused your efforts on the most measurable and performance-based tactics, you need to take action—fast. It's understandable that your PR efforts will receive extra scrutiny these days. The good news is that many of your initiatives—particularly those on the Web—should be fairly easy to adjust on the fly. Prior to making changes, remember to establish baseline metrics, and then strive to better your current results.

**3. Focus on fusion.** Some of the best tactics that deliver the measurement and speed I've been talking about are hybrids of several marketing disciplines, blending the credibility of PR with the measurability and dynamic speed of advertising. Sponsored or brand-driven Web articles, for example, can deliver traffic to clients' sites on a cost-per-click model. This performance-based method is highly measurable—and the editorial nature of the articles offers a powerful and credible brand message. Because clients can measure results so quickly, they're able to scale dollars up or down depending on the articles' success.

At some point, the economy is going to rebound. Like you, I'm hoping it's sooner than later. Regardless, I know that we as PR practitioners are better served when cooler heads prevail, and when we refrain from reacting out of fear and uncertainty. We are all following the economic news, but operating from a position of data-driven confidence may be just the breath of fresh air your clients need right now. And it can help to maintain—and hopefully grow—your budgets down the road.

*Scott Severson is the president of ARAnet, Inc., a leading media company with two products to help its clients reach and win new customers. ARAcontent generates feature article placements in print and online publications that build awareness of its clients' products and services. Adfusion, an article-based cost per click advertising platform, is one of the nation's most dynamic online advertising networks, currently delivering more than three billion impressions monthly through a network of premium publishing partners.*

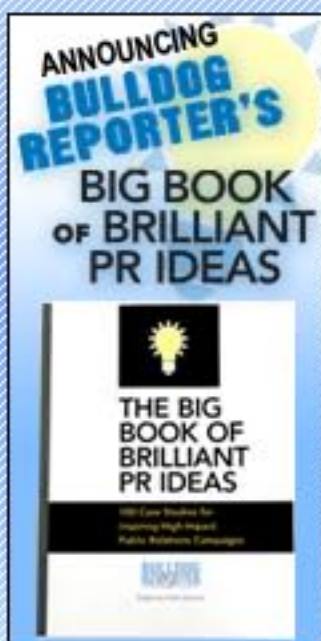
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