

The Power of Voice: Effective Communication Strategies to Weather an Economic Storm

Downturn ... decline ... crisis ... recession. Whatever term you choose to describe the current state of the economy, chances are good that it's a negative and pessimistic one. For many of us, our professional lives have been thrown into a tailspin by reduced staff, slashed budgets, and conservative communication and marketing strategies that are forcing us to do more with less. Where are we headed? When will we get there? Will we be successful? When uncertainty abounds, there is a tendency to stay silent, and many organizations are reluctant to answer these questions and communicate effectively with their clients, employees, and peers. But silence is rarely "golden," and it's important to use effective external, internal, and interpersonal communications not only to survive but to thrive, in good times and bad.

Inform and Engage Your Employees

All too often, organizations reach out to and communicate with their employees in good times but neglect to do so—intentionally or otherwise—during less stable times. For almost any organization to succeed, a strong internal communication strategy is paramount. At all times, employees need to be engaged. They need to know that the work they are doing, and the time they spend doing it, are appreciated.

In the face of economic uncertainty, it can be all too easy for an organization to lose sight of the importance of internal communication, spending its time and money talking solely to external audiences. But failing to keep employees informed and engaged can lead to uncertainty, fear, and mistrust and may even cause a decline in morale, motivation, and personal performance.

For obvious reasons, it's not always possible to tell everyone everything. But for organizations that speak to their employees on a regular basis and, when necessary, acknowledge that difficult times may be ahead, the respect and loyalty fostered internally will help maintain a strong employee base. It may also mean less frequent turnover once the market regains balance.

Talk to Your Stakeholders Regularly

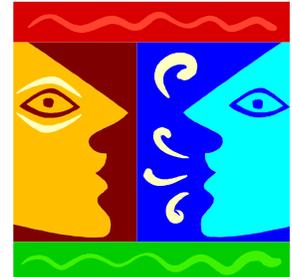
Your donors and volunteers need to know that what they are giving—be it money, time, or both—is making a difference, and they need reassurance from you that your organization continues to be worthy of their attention. In uncertain times, it is more important than ever to connect with and speak to your stakeholders proactively and on a regular basis to maintain and further strengthen the relationships you've worked so hard to build with them.

But it seems like the first budgets to get cut in an unstable economy belong to the marketing and public relations departments. Press releases, events, maintaining an on-line presence—these are all things that may fall by the wayside when money is tight. Talking to your current stakeholders doesn't need to be costly or difficult, and a mix of traditional and Web 2.0 strategies can keep you connected to those important to you and your organization:

Personal outreach: Depending on the size of your volunteer and/or donor base, staying connected can be as simple as a telephone call or e-mail. Reach out to your stakeholders with your campaigns and marketing efforts, and also let them know that you are ready to answer any questions or concerns they may have.

Press releases and media relations: Even with a restricted or reduced budget, it's important to communicate on a regular basis with the media—both traditional and Web 2.0—via press releases, to ensure that important messages reach those who need to hear them. Regular distribution of press releases on the Internet is also key to your on-line communication strategy and works in tandem with optimizing your content.

Web site and blogs: Make sure the content on your Web site is current for anyone looking for information on your organization. If you offer on-line giving or volunteer applications, be certain to keep them up to date, too. If your organization has a blog, keep your posts frequent and informative, and if you don't have a blog, why not start one?



SEO (search engine optimization) strategies: Increase your visibility on the Internet by optimizing the content on your Web site to make it easy for new stakeholder groups and the media to find your organization on Google and other search engines. SEO doesn't need to be prohibitively expensive, so talk to your IT team about solutions for in-house or cost-effective outsourced solutions.

Webinars: If traditional in-person fundraising and educational events aren't feasible, on-line events and Webinars can bring together hundreds, even thousands, of like-minded people in a cost-effective way.

Keep Up with Your Professional Networks

It's always been good practice to keep up with your industry, colleagues, and the marketplace. Being active in industry associations and professional groups has historically been an effective way to stay connected and share experiences with peers and keep on top of goings-on in your community. Face-to-face communication and networking is still an incredibly valuable way to meet new people and promote your organization, but today, a "follower" on Twitter can be as valuable as a business card from an in-person meeting.

The explosion of social networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook has brought people together like never before and has given professionals an entirely new place to meet, connect, and build relationships. In fact, LinkedIn is thriving in the recession: overall, [traffic has more than doubled](#), to 6.9 million users in February from 3.3 million a year earlier, according to *Fortune* magazine. From sharing best practice in business to searching for new hires, it's vital to get connected and stay connected.

Even with sound communication practices in place, navigating turbulent economic waters can be difficult. But by implementing as many of these strategies as possible, you'll be equipped not only with tools to help you weather today's storm but ones that will continue to help you better connect with and engage those critical for success.