

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - February 28, 2005
<http://seattle.bizjournals.com/seattle/stories/2005/02/28/smallb2.html>



ENTERPRISE

From the February 25, 2005 print edition

Small business bulletins

Public relations often suffer as budgets tighten

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When times get tough at some small businesses, one of the first things cut is probably the public relations budget.

Working with a smaller public relations budget will be the topic of a March 10 seminar sponsored by the Seattle chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. Jeffrey Ory of Deveney Communications of New Orleans will be the speaker, talking via teleconference.

Ory said public relations budgets are among the first to face the budget-cutting ax for varied reasons, including a lack of public relations knowledge among higher-level executives.

"Those who are further up the food chain don't recognize what public relations can do for them," said Ory, who is president of the PRSA New Orleans chapter and president of the International Association of Business Communicators New Orleans chapter.

Many executives don't understand how effective public relations can be measured, and Ory said many PR professionals fail to explain how PR can be used effectively.

"They [executives] don't understand us, and we don't give enough information on what we're doing," Ory said. "Part of our job is to educate them about the [PR] process."

Measuring effective public relations can be harder than measuring, say, an effective sales campaign. And there lies another problem with PR, he said.

Many people think you can use press clippings to measure PR's effectiveness. "That is the most common way, but not the best way," Ory said.

One measuring system is the "gap analysis," where a survey is taken of, say, the public's current awareness of a company. Then another survey is taken a few months later, after a public relations campaign is instituted, and the "gap" between the two surveys is measured, hopefully in a positive way for the company.

But the surveys measuring "gaps" can be expensive, Ory said. He says there are more effective uses of PR money, such as spending more money on initial research instead of ongoing surveys.

And PR professionals should be realistic about the services they're capable of providing.

"You can't say, 'I'll get you on the front page of The Wall Street Journal,'" when it comes to media relations, Ory said, because that type of promise is impossible to keep.

"Our responsibility is to educate a company" on what can and can't be done with a media relations budget, he said.

He said when working with smaller companies, one of the biggest problems PR professionals face is the small amount of time they get to spend with the people who run the company. Because those people have so many balls in the air, "time is always an issue."

Over the past couple of years, the PR industry has been hit hard by the economic downturn, but "we're slowly working our way back," Ory said.

He'll explain in detail how PR professionals can work with smaller budgets at noon March 10 at the Publicis Seattle office, 424 Second Ave. W., on the fifth floor. To register for the event, call 206-623-8623.

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