

# Professional services firms rebound with new tools

**While many businesses have battened down the hatches to weather the ‘Great Recession,’ savvy professional services firms are turning to communications to position themselves for growth when the economy finally recovers — whenever that may be. As challenging as the downturn is for PR budgets, it’s also been a catalyst for well-capitalized professional services firms to solidify client relationships by launching new communications initiatives.**

By Patricia L. Harden

**T**he recession is spawning a wave of consolidation in many industries, with the strong survivors growing market share and absorbing weaker rivals. For healthy professional services firms, it’s a great time to be visible and demonstrate leadership. It’s a time when that visibility more readily translates into new strategic alliances, partnerships, and expanding business opportunities as the competitive landscape shifts.

For professional services firms, the revolution in communications has unleashed a vast new arsenal of tools and channels uniquely well-suited to showcase their expertise online. Clients in engineering, law, accounting, architecture and wealth management are seizing this moment in time to position themselves as highly visible leaders and “go-to” resources for prospects and the media. With recovery glimmering on the horizon, more firms are upping their investments to outflank recession-weakened competitors.

The sheer abundance of communications channels and tactics available to professional services firms underscores the need for a comprehensive communications strategy — something that PR professionals are best equipped to provide. Below is a list of 10 communications strategies that professional services firms are deploying to position themselves for accelerated growth in 2011 and beyond.

**Increase and enhance client communications.** Clients are gold — and their care is never more critical than in a recession. Whatever the format or medium, clients of professional services firms want to hear from their trusted advisors during challenging times. This means direct client contact, as well as firm-wide messages from the CEO or Managing Partner. For clients who communicate only through quarterly newsletters or statements, we recommend more frequent, event-driven communication as a way of strengthening relationships in trying times.

**Formalize and deepen referral net-**

**works.** It’s amazing how many professional services businesses that rely on referrals as the lifeblood of their business lack a systematic approach to obtaining these very referrals. In addition to one-on-one meetings, we’ve assisted clients in formalizing a program of “meet and greets,” where they host referral sources.

**Increase speaking engagements.** Face-to-face communications have added impact during times of economic travail. It’s the ideal time for “trusted experts” to step up and share their knowledge and perspective, which in turn solidifies their stature as leaders in their field.

Clients are increasingly receptive to community speaking engagements, as well as national industry platforms. While trade show budgets may be reduced, industry presence can be maintained through speaking engagements. Each speaking engagement in turn provides the potential for news releases or media advisories, client email or online coverage of the event.

**Showcase expertise in blogs, podcasts, e-newsletters and webinars.** These “real-time” communications formats are ready-made for showcasing your clients’ knowledge about business issues and developments as they unfold. With the barrage of new regulations, CPAs, attorneys and other experts are well-positioned to issue non-promotional updates on tax, accounting or health care rules. Brevity and timeliness are key. With these periodic, informative communications providing a value-added way to keep your client’s name in front of their clients and prospects. Even traditionally conservative firms are beginning to see the value of blogs as a way to build relationships and dialogue with stakeholders, especially in regards to their future clients.

**Update website and optimize for search engines.** Many professional services firms created their websites in the early years of the decade and have neglected them since.

With searches for all kinds of services increasingly started online, it’s critical that professional services firms search engine

optimize (SEO) their websites, so that they appear as high as possible in online search rankings.

As long as the site is being optimized for search, it’s a good time to refresh the content and design so that it reflects the firm’s current positioning and content is timely versus the all-too-often outdated speaking engagements and yesterday’s tired content.

**Capitalize on LinkedIn and online ranking sites.** LinkedIn is the primary source for professionals in all walks of life. Be sure your clients’ profiles are up-to-date and compellingly presented. Every profession has its own rankings and ratings sites that often require no more than a submission to gain a listing, which can help boost online search rankings.

**Personalize your brand with video.** Because professional services firms rely on trust and chemistry as well as expertise to win clients, short video interviews with practice leaders are a great channel for revealing the “personality” of the firms’ principals. Videos can be posted to website as well as on YouTube.

**Client surveys.** In a recession, professional services firms recognize the value of their loyal clients more than ever. Several firms we work with have recently conducted client surveys, to learn how they measure up, what’s working and what’s not. Survey findings can be leveraged in testimonials or case studies on the client’s website or with empirical data-based claims, such as “90% would recommend.”

**Bylined articles.** Every niche of professional services has its own specialty and technical publications. With advertising in the doldrums, these journals, whether online or in print, are increasingly reliant on articles submitted by experts in their respective fields. Once your client’s article is published, you can link to it on the website, note it in client emails, and otherwise leverage it to demonstrate thought leadership.

**Traditional media visibility.** Despite the rise of the blogosphere, traditional media continues to have impact. With the spate of regulations across industries, your professional services clients can be positioned as expert commentators on breaking news and issues in their categories. Even better, if your client can identify a trend of broader interest and comment on it, you can shape the story. Using Skype, clients can now do video interviews for national news outlets from their own offices.

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