



# Despite Economy, Communicators Still Finding Ways to **Innovate, Engage**

By Anne Wainscott-Sargent

## Social Media Tools Coming into Their Own

No corporate or agency communicator needs to be told that the economy has affected the world of strategic communications – you only have to look at the cuts in staff and in budget for everything from publications to PR and marketing initiatives.

IABC Research Foundation’s “Employee Engagement Survey” of 1,500 communicators found that more than half of the respondents report their communication budgets have decreased, and 35 percent report their communication staff has been reduced over the past 12 months. The top reason cited for the cuts was the economic downturn. (For more survey highlights, see sidebar). In addition, IABC finds that 14 percent of members have

lost their job in the last 12 months. That's an increase over the survey taken three months ago, when fewer than 11 percent of members reported losing their job in the last 12 months.

In spite of this news, the expectations for the role of internal and external communications in a time of uncertainty and change have never been greater. And several companies have not let the economic recession keep them from investing in and even reinventing their brands – using cost-effective communication offerings as well as social media to connect to audiences and keep them engaged.

“Some companies are responding by hunkering down for survival, and some are saying, ‘Let’s redefine ourselves for growth. The recession will end and we want our brand and company to be at a leadership position. Let’s take steps that will position us for leadership and dominance when the marketplace turns around,’” notes **Karlenne Trimble**, head of employee engagement for MS&L Worldwide.

Trimble and other professional communicators shared with *empart* ways they are innovating and helping their clients navigate through a challenging climate.



**Sharon Goldmacher**, president of communications 21, an Atlanta-based integrated marketing public relations and interactive firm, recalls: “Last year we saw what was on the horizon, and said, ‘What types of things can we do differently to help clients? We developed a set of products people could use one time or a few times.’” Those products include a Marketing Dashboard Plan on a Page<sup>sm</sup>; Media Relations Tackle Box<sup>sm</sup>, ideal for franchise operations or non-profits that features a templated program of releases, calendar items and event listings; and a media training product called “Be Heard.”

Goldmacher notes, “Companies have less money to spend and they’re being very careful on how they spend it – focusing on ROI and getting results. They’re not doing the status quo. They are seeking a little added creativity to stretch their marketing dollars.” More and more companies are using two-way exchanges online to build brand loyalty and identify business priorities.

**Melanie Babcock**, MS&L’s senior vice president of Digital Strategy & Services, says, “The economic situation is forcing companies to consider the social media channel and adopt it at a faster rate. In these hard economic times, the companies are looking at all their marketing programs and really evaluating their value

*Sharon Goldmacher (above) is the president of communications 21, an Atlanta-based integrated marketing public relations and interactive firm.*

and where they are getting the most for their money. Social media is a channel they can try out and see if it's effective at a lower cost."

Babcock says companies can embrace social media in a unique way by leveraging employees' social media connections. "You can empower that employee to carry your company message to their personal networks if done the right way. Employees are connected to hundreds if not thousands of people. Reaching out to your employee base – who already believe in the brand mission – is an untapped resource for many companies because they don't know how to organize their communication efforts with their employees to enable them to speak on behalf of the company. Companies are trialing these type of programs in smaller campaigns to see how it works in their organization. So far, we are having a lot of success."

## Growing Facebook Fan Base for **The Avenue**

Communications 21's Goldmacher is also seeing strong interest from clients in her company's social media offerings. Her interactive division has experienced a huge uptick in clients asking to be educated on social media through seminars and webinars. One Communication 21 retail client, Cousin Properties/The Avenue, launched a Facebook page late last year in hopes of bolstering sluggish holiday sales.

"They had about 65 fans at the time, but they didn't know what to do with it at that point," recalls Goldmacher, whose team did the social media component of The Avenue's Affordable Luxuries holiday campaign last December. It focused on what you could find for under \$25, under \$50 and under \$100. The online promotion's goal was to attract 1,000 fans from 65 in about three weeks. Facebook fans were eligible for a prize package valued at about \$500.

"We built an entire campaign about getting people engaged and talking about The Avenue and the affordable luxuries they found. In three weeks, we grew the fan base to more than 1300. The client was blown away," recalls Goldmacher, who adds that the program drove an increase in fans talking about good deals, including 100 unsolicited pro-Avenue comments. Fans were encouraged to post their deals with pictures and nearly 300 photos were uploaded to the site. Today, the site has almost 2,500 fans – and Communications 21 now does quarterly promotions for The Avenue around Facebook. Goldmacher says the retailer



plans to engage in Twitter by late 2009/early 2010.

## GM: Social Media and Protecting Brand Reputation

Social media also came into play in a big way for another MS&L client, GM, when the Big 3 automotive maker filed for bankruptcy. According to Trimble, a war room was created and internal/external communications and agency people were all in one room. Through Twitter, Facebook, GM's corporate blog and other vehicles, they shared information and kept all their stakeholders up to date on what was happening. Through social media, GM managed its reputation, while helping stakeholder understanding and employee engagement.

According to Trimble, GM's leadership had to get comfortable with a more informal way of communicating. "They really saw the benefit of rapid response, of engagement, of more dialogue-oriented communications. Having that flexibility and style of communication was very beneficial in an unprecedented time," she explains.

## SunTrust: New Brand, Online Community Outreach

Chuck Allen, SunTrust's internal communications director, says his company was in the midst of launching a new brand positioning last year under the theme, "Live Solid. Bank Solid" to replace "Seeing Beyond Money." The company's new chief marketing officer led the effort, which embraced concepts that the bank's research had found resonated with custom-

ers even before the full effect of the economic downturn was apparent – concepts like a return to core values of responsibility, accountability and living within your means.

"Our new positioning was focused more on how we can help our clients weather the storm. Given the timeliness [of this message] in the marketplace and given the downturn of the economy, we decided to move the brand positioning launch from a six-month implementation to a six-week implementation," says Allen. He adds that at the time SunTrust launched the new brand in November of last year, it afforded him the opportunity to begin a dialogue with SunTrust "teammates" of what the SunTrust brand really means. Beginning this year, SunTrust launched two facilitated online communities – one externally and one internally focused. The external community has 300 participants and allows SunTrust marketers to listen more deeply to what clients have to say about the current financial environment, what they were feeling about it. "We put surveys in front of them, and in addition to answering questions, they could post their own discussion threads."

The second community has 340 SunTrust teammates representing a number of roles and functions throughout the bank, with very senior-level executives deliberately excluded from the community. In addition to fun community-building discussion topics, Allen weaves in questions about how SunTrust is doing on the goal of putting clients first, or on delivering learning objectives, or working as one team, or how the company has changed the way it talks. "The community let me know that words are important, but action is more important," he

says. “That helps me...know what I need to lead with.”

## Economy Underscores Need for Communications

Has the economy affected SunTrust’s level of investment in social media and the new brand? No, says Allen.

“This is no time to lose touch with our clients and prospects and no time to lose touch with our teammates. Despite the economic conditions, we decided to explore and dig deeper into the perspectives of our clients, prospects and teammates,” he says.

Clearly, social media is here to stay. While all the professional communicators are quick to point out that social media isn’t for everyone, many companies choosing to embrace interactive dialogue with their employees and customers stand to win over the long term.

MS&L’s Trimble, speaking from her role in employee engagement, believes that companies and communicators who recognize that the communications landscape has changed and who embrace the change are most positioned for post-recession success. “I think they will come out of the recession and be really proud of how they transitioned and navigated and actually have a richer dialogue and exchange with employees,” she says.



## More Investment in Social Media

IABC finds that employers faced with reduced communication budgets and resources are turning to social media to keep their workforce engaged. IABC’s survey, co-sponsored by Buck Consultants, found that:

- 47 percent said company blogs are the most popular social media tool currently in use.
- 33 percent said discussion boards are ranked the highest for future planned use.
- 29 percent of respondents said they use podcasts.
- 28 percent said they use videocasts.
- 27 percent said they used internal social networks.
- 24 percent said they used RSS feeds.

Current use of social networking sites such as Twitter (21 percent), Twitter inside a corporate firewall (20 percent), and Facebook (18 percent) is significant, but organizations are planning to use those tools even more in the future.