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Client service key to riding out economic unease

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As the economic climate dampens, new business opportunities across the industry, some PR firms are focusing on client service to shore up existing accounts.

For instance, proactive surveying of client satisfaction enables New York-based Makovsky & Company to identify issues before they prompt exits.

“My experience is that clients don't always tell agencies when they are dissatisfied, and that cancellations can come unexpectedly,” says agency president Ken Makovsky.

The firm's Quality Commitment Program (QCP) asks clients to complete an online evaluation of the agency's performance at least once per year. (Makovsky cites a 65% compliance rate.) This is followed by a meeting with the account team. Makovsky also retains an independent auditor who calls clients up to three times per year to review performance. VPs and group leaders are eligible for bonuses based, in part, on QCP results.

“What makes client service essential in a bad economy is that client loss is more damaging,” Makovsky adds. “Agencies need diagnostic tools, now more than ever, to gauge client health.”

These days, Trevelino/Keller Communications Group in Atlanta is more aggressively approaching clients to suggest they rethink investments in paid media.

“We know that now is the ideal time to encourage clients to pull some of their paid advertising and take a look at more affordable options, such as social media,” says Dean Trevelino, principal of the firm. “Right now, we're looking at our client base and seeing where we can have these conversations, to help them remain aggressive, but not spend the kind of money they've been spending on paid advertising.”

This gives the firm the context to introduce SocialStatus, its recently launched platform for integrating clients into social media and networks.

“It's designed to be flexible and affordable, which is important during a downturn,” Trevelino says.

Meanwhile, Darcie Meihoff, MD of PR at Portland, OR-based CMD Agency, says that when budget cuts are looming, the firm volunteers cost-saving suggestions to help clients separate the nice-to-haves from the need-to-haves.

Already this year, she says, CMD has approached multiple clients with this strategy before any axe could fall. The firm believes it retained those accounts by suggesting cuts and helping to prioritize spends.

“This is the best-case scenario in these situations because you are working together on setting priorities, instead of having them dictated to you,” Meihoff explains.

CMD has also emphasized the depth and breadth of proactive status updates, she adds.

“We've made a conscious effort, on a quarterly basis, to send clients updates on progress we've made, actions we've taken, and results we've generated,” Meihoff says.

Lastly, know when to cut the cord. “If you've proven tremendous value, stellar results, and incredible efficiencies, and the client still doesn't value or believe that PR is an essential component to business recovery,” Meihoff stresses, “your energies may be better spent elsewhere – downturn or no downturn.”

Key points:

- Regularly surveying clients for satisfaction can minimize account base losses
- When budget cuts are imminent, proactively recommending where savings can be realized can save the relationship
- Providing regular status reports can help a client make the case internally for agency retention