

PR shop alters strategy to keep pace with clients

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The Aker Partners, a D.C.-based public relations firm, has created a service dubbed "takeout PR" to work with cash-strapped clients in a tough economy.

Takeout PR means doing per-project contracts and even sending employees to work on site with a clients for a short time, says David Narsavage, a senior partner at Aker.

Aker's shift in strategy reflects a growing need among marketing shops to bend their business practices to fit the needs of their clients, many of whom have cut staff and reduced their PR and advertising budgets.

"Clients know they can benefit from a long-term partnership with a PR firm," Narsavage says, "but really all they can afford right now are some strategic interventions, and we recognize that. We're telling them we don't need to get married; we can guide them through selective engagements."

This type of flexibility has become essential, says Heathere Evans-Keenan, a board member of the local chapter of the Public Relations Society of America.

"You just have to employ different business models now because clients are struggling," says Evans-Keenan, founder and president of Keenan PR in Arlington. "Part of our job as PR professionals is to help them find solutions to their business problems. One solution can be to provide a valuable service they need right now but in a way that they can afford."

Keenan PR (www.keenanpr.com) itself is an example of a flexible, unconventional agency. Evans-Keenan works from home, as does her network of PR executives — a network she culls from when assembling teams for clients.

Although Keenan PR does little per-project work, Evans-Keenan says more clients are eschewing flat-fee retainer billing in favor of paying a certain amount monthly or quarterly for a specific level of service.

"They're all looking for ways to get a high level of service and senior-level counsel for an affordable price," she says. "What I'm seeing more of is, 'Here are our problems, here's our overall marketing budget. Help counsel us as to how we should spend it in a way that makes sense because this is all we have at this point.'"

Narsavage says Aker's (www.akerpartners.com) takeout approach could mean doing short-term work, such as writing a major speech for an annual meeting or drumming up media interest for a new product or event. "There isn't an agency that would prefer a short-term existence to long-term existence," he says. "In the latter, you can budget and plan more effectively. You can staff more effectively. You go the other way, and it just creates a lot more heartburn. But with enough Pepcid, we'll get through it."

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