

# Alternative ways

By [Marie Yossava](#), issued by [Grapevine Communications](#)

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The phrases most commonly mentioned in 2009 were 'the economic downturn' or 'recessionary times', and there are few local companies that won't admit they have felt its effects in different ways. From downsizing and restructuring to smarter operations and cutting overheads, the year was a trying one that tested everyone's ability to bounce back and make use of innovative thinking to make it through to year-end.



More positive, however, is the resilience that some agencies have experienced, seeing the downturn as an opportunity to reflect and re-look at the way they conduct business. There are those agencies that have reviewed their approach, and embraced the old adage 'adapt or die'.

Looking back, what has been happening in the local PR landscape in light of times that call for resilience? While budgets have been slashed, clients have looked to alternative ways of doing publicity, many using in-house skills to save on consultancies' fees. Clients are also trying the one-stop-shop approach of a fullfunction agency that offers advertising, marketing, promotions and PR, negotiating a good price across all disciplines in return for the full scope of work. Social media has been a hot topic of debate in the communications sector, particularly in discussions on which discipline should own it: advertising or public relations. Those PR agencies that are embracing the new social media in a tough climate are able to offer value-add to existing and new customers, and therefore offer the client more value for their communications spend than in previous years when the markets were booming. PR agencies have often been referred to as the poor cousin of the advertising/communications industry, but whether one liked it or not, many PR agencies have had to cut whatever fat was being made from the boom, and become leaner. If reducing fees to maintain a workflow was the right approach for 2009, being honest with the client was imperative. Determining the work involved for the price was key to ensuring that the client always felt that the agency had over-delivered. This enabled the agency to take on more clients using the same number of resources, without comprising on quality and attention to achieve the best media relations possible.

But shouldn't PR have shown an upswing during the recession period when PR is so often a more affordable/cost-effective service than that of other communications?

While the recession has made PR operations tougher for agencies, all is not doom and gloom. Those that managed to ride the storm are agencies that have continued to ensure that their PR strategy is integral to the company's business goals, and have clearly demonstrated the value derived from their communications investment to help grow the business. These clients have maintained their PR consultants even when budgets have been tight, relinquishing other services that have not been able to show a direct correlation to promoting the business imperatives.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marie is founder and managing member of Grapevine Communications, a communications consultancy that focuses on media relations and journalism skills. Her awards are a tribute to the efforts she has made as a woman founding and managing her own business. Marie is in the vanguard of new thinking, pressing the need for a re-evaluation of the industry. Her emphasis is on communication based on a more thorough understanding of the client/customer market, the fast moving trends in consumer demand and a thorough understanding of how the media works. Email her on [marie@grapevinecommunications.co.za](mailto:marie@grapevinecommunications.co.za).

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