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Shrinking Newsrooms in 2009: PR Pros Will Lose Connections as Layoffs Continue—Here's How to Cope



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Venerable news organizations like the Tribune Company, NBC News, CNN and WNBC are laying off staff and the hemorrhaging isn't likely to stop any time soon. Dozens more journalists are writing their last columns or signing off on their final newscasts today.

As a former TV news producer, I'm disheartened to see the demise of local TV news and worry about the fate of former colleagues. Journalists have become collateral damage from the evolution of media into the digital space. Let's face it, the changing face of journalism is no surprise, but the economic downturn is making that change happen faster than most expected.

As newsrooms adapt to the digital space, so does the art of relationship building between PR professionals and the media. Soon will be gone the days of picking up the phone to call a single trusted contact in a newsroom. Many familiar names and voices are being forced out of the news business. It can be even tougher now to get through to a segment producer you've worked with before to book a guest or pitch a story to a print reporter you've known for most of your career.

Yet, PR professionals still have client partners who rely on them to secure editorial coverage of their brand. It's a tricky time, but both PR and editorial media need to embrace digital ways to stay relevant. It's critical for both our survival. Here are some ideas for coping:

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- **Get plugged in or perish.** If you don't blog, you should. If you aren't on Twitter, get tweeting. At many PR agencies there are separate digital media practice areas, but shouldn't we all be focusing on that space? Certainly, 2009 will be a time when digital will be fully integrated into everything we do. It won't be long before we'll stop segmenting media as "traditional" and "digital."

Online will be the mainstream and even journalists who don't evolve will go the way of typewriters and the old conveyer belt teleprompters. If you're tracking the newsroom layoffs, it can seem bleak. The good news is the economy will turn around and journalists and PR practitioners who are willing to embrace the changes will thrive. After all, journalists are the checks and balances of our society and online should be an enticing place for all of us to be. It doesn't get any more transparent and authentic than the conversations that are taking place online.

- **Give your press release a makeover.** There's no way to avoid the undeniable changes that are taking place around us. To keep up with editorial media changes, start by getting educated on Press Release Optimization (PRO) as a way to make your content Web friendly. It will make your release digital ready and more likely to turn up in online searches.
- **Email your story idea to TV newsroom contacts.** Most producers prefer to book all details of a segment that way. With less people in a newsroom, no one has time to answer phones or return calls.
- **Reach out to a print journalist using Twitter.** Find out which key journalists are on Twitter and start a conversation with them. You may be surprised to see how quickly you'll get a response.
- **Find out which journalists are blogging.** Read their blogs and even get engaged with them by posting comments.
- **Don't rely on a single contact at a news organization.** Take time to build relationships with more than one person so you have multiple points of contact.
- **Don't reach out to a journalist only when you want to pitch a story.** Read their columns, watch their segments, and follow their blogs to find ways to connect with them over similar thoughts or interests.

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- **Help out a reporter in this tough time, and they'll be sure to remember you.** Those who are working in newsrooms today, both print and broadcast, are stretched now more than ever. Be aware of the pressure on them to fill many roles and position yourself as a resource for them.