

## Communication for the Nation

Public relations, used wisely, can be one of the most successful and cost-effective means of marketing a company's goods and services. Gwynneth Cockcroft, from DCP Strategic Communications explains why it should be one of the last costs to suffer the accountant's wrath...

"It is disappointing that marketing - and PR in particular - are soft targets for the red pen when budgets are being drawn up. That seems pretty bizarre logic to me.

"The only way any business makes money is to sell its products or services. Businesses can't make money by having incredibly efficient manufacturing, comprehensive staff training, nor indeed through strict financial controls or great distribution.

"They can only do it by selling. And you sell by finding out who your customers are, letting them know about your company, the benefits of your products and how they can get hold of them.

"Letting people know about your company, creating a 'mutual understanding' between a business and its audiences is what PR does, or is supposed to do. It rarely sells - instead it creates the right environment for selling.

"It helps to open doors and gives reassurance to purchasers and stakeholders even if it's just name recognition.

"Successful businesses are built on relationships with external audiences - customers, stakeholders, influencers. Cut off links to these audiences at your peril! Staying close to your customers during a recession is critical because other people will be trying hard to woo them away from you.

"PR is by far the most flexible of the marketing disciplines - it works to media deadlines rather than printers' or designers' and importantly in the current climate, effective PR deals equally well with success as with disaster.

"For example, a company makes 25% of its workforce redundant and closes a factory. Depending on the communication, that's either a business in serious difficulties and one that could well go under, or an organisation that is reacting swiftly, decisively and strategically to ensure its long-term future. Which do you think your clients would prefer to do business with?

"If you don't control the perception of your brand and the communication of key offers or changes, someone else will. Either a vacuum will form and be filled with rumour and speculation - or your competitors will start to look for your market share through their own effective communication."

Gwynneth Cockcroft is Managing Director of DCP Strategic Communications. DCP is a public relations, public affairs and corporate reputation specialist. Gwyneth can be contacted by phone on 028 9040 2296, online at [www.dcprr.co.uk](http://www.dcprr.co.uk) or by [email](#).

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