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### CW Bulletin

*CW Bulletin* is the e-newsletter supplement to *CW* magazine. Sent each month to all members, every issue of *CW Bulletin* presents articles, case studies and additional resources on timely topics in communication.

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### Here's Less, Do More: Cut costs without compromising creativity

by Rebecca Kavanagh

While communicators across the world brace themselves against the winds of tough economic times, those in Michigan have been braving the storm for half a decade.

Based in Detroit, creative director Sheila Young Tomkowiak, who has more than 25 years of publications experience as an art director, editor and writer, has collaborated with local clients as they've struggled through five years of economic challenges. Now she's starting to feel that same pinch from clients everywhere: They need her to achieve the same results on a smaller budget.

Tomkowiak and her partners at custom publisher Grayton Integrated Publishing (which produces IABC's *Communication World* magazine) answered this same call during the dot-com bust, when tech clients in Silicon Valley were floundering, but keen to project an image of confidence to customers. I sat down with Tomkowiak to find out how she saves money on the sly.

#### How can you get the most for your money before a project even begins?

The common approach to putting creative projects out to bid is to say to five different agencies, "This is what I want. How much will you charge me for it?" I propose flipping that around to say, "This is my budget. What can you give me for it?" When you're presented with the choices, you can make your decision on merit and services offered rather than price.

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- [An Art in Itself](#)  
As creativity in the modern workplace keeps growing, a new management style can improve any business.

After all, that's how you shop for anything else, isn't it? You need to buy a car, and you know you want to spend US\$20,000, so you go to three dealerships and say to each sales consultant, "Show me what you've got for around US\$20,000." You don't tend to walk into a car dealership and say, "Show me everything you can possibly offer me." You've got a car payment in mind, and it's the same thing with a project.

You know your budget—and I'm going to know your budget once you hire me. Why should it be a secret from the start? In these tough economic times, it makes more sense than ever to say, "This is what I've got budgeted. What can I get?"

**And what about once you've hired the creative team? How can you be efficient right from the start?**

Make sure you are clear about what you want right away. For example, instead of asking the designer to create three samples using three different design approaches, spend more time up front clearly defining what your objectives are. If you've budgeted three hours for concept creation and you ask for three approaches, your designer will spend one hour on each. But if you've clearly defined your objectives, he or she can spend the entire three hours nailing one perfect way to go.

**What's the first step to defining your objectives?**

Whether you're creating a magazine or a brochure or launching a full-blown campaign, don't discuss what it will look like until you've agreed on its purpose. Who is your audience? What are you telling them? What are you hoping to achieve? Don't try to figure out if your vehicle should be a bus or a Ferrari until you've determined where it's coming from and where it's headed.

**You shouldn't bother top management with those discussions, right?**

Wrong. If you take a finished project to someone at the top without getting his or her buy-in ahead of time, you can expect changes—and they'll be expensive, end-of-process changes. Not bogging down executives with details is one thing, but top managers absolutely should be part of the initial conversation when you're crafting a mission statement for the project. Get their sign-off on the direction of the vehicle, and then you can take that information away and work out the details. Later, when they're approving proofs and ask you something like, "Why did you choose red?" you can reply with confidence, "As you recall, you said we needed to be bright and lively. That's why we chose red."

**Projects seem to slow down during the internal approval process. When that affects the schedule and, ultimately, the budget, what can be done?**

You have to assume that people will procrastinate; it's human nature to put off today what you really don't have to do until tomorrow. To offset that, be

very, very clear about when you need things and exactly what you need.

If you're routing approvals through five different people, you'll need tracking sheets to show who's seen what. With multiple approvals, it helps to provide e-mail updates stating who has responded and who hasn't so that people are held accountable to their colleagues.

Don't just send things out into the ether and wait, assuming that people will respond without reminders. You need to remind, and you need to determine which kind of reminder will be most effective. Lawyers tend to like things in writing; executives might prefer that you schedule a brief meeting to review their changes. As you remind, be polite, pleasant and exceedingly persistent.

Sometimes money talks. If people are dragging their feet, they might be motivated by your saying, "We need this approved by such-and-such date or the meter starts running."

Once you get multiple sets of changes back from the various reviewers, save time and ward off huge issues down the road by compiling the edits and giving your creative team one set of changes to incorporate. Your outside vendor doesn't know your internal political pecking order; you're the one who needs to make the call when Executive A's edits contradict Executive B's.

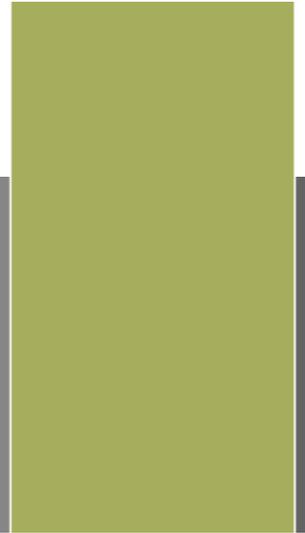
#### **Can't I just fill my creative team in on those details?**

Yes! Everything is easier when you don't hoard information. So much time and energy can be saved when you let the entire team know everything you know. Sometimes clients are hesitant to clue their creative team in on office politics. How would your writer know that he should never mention Executive A and Executive B in the same story unless he were told that's a no-no? If you ask your photographer to take a profile photo without telling her that the focus of the story is on plummeting profits, don't be surprised to receive a happy batch of smiling portraits. Share what you know, and you'll save the expense of fixing preventable problems.

#### **Should we try to do as much of the work on staff as possible?**

Not always. You need to do an analysis of the real cost of staff time first. Don't forget to look at the "soft costs" of overwhelming staff members with projects that take them away from their main functions. This is especially critical when you are asked to do more with fewer people.

For example, we did a corporate history book where the client wanted to use internal people to conduct photo searches and generate the first draft of the copy because he thought it would be less expensive. But the staff members were overwhelmed by the task, and we eventually had



to step in and do more. In the end, the client paid more than what they should have for a book that took twice as long as it should have. A better approach would have been to do what another book client did: Involve staff members in the up-front decision making. This way, the client was able to give us clear marching orders, staff members were freed up to do their jobs and we were empowered to do ours—efficiently and on budget.

*Rebecca Kavanagh is a communication specialist with more than 15 years of experience in writing, project management, editing and copyediting. She is based in Farmington Hills, Michigan.*