

Category 1: 'RIDING THE RAPIDS'

Bread PR for PSN, Ernst & Young, McGrigors LLP.

STRATEGY

PSN is a billion-dollar energy company that supplies engineering expertise to oil companies, like Shell, through a network of 8000 people, working in 23 countries.

2009 was a tough year for the energy sector with unprecedented oil price volatility. This shook the confidence of a bullish industry. **Bread PR's Louise Nicolson boldly advocated that the PSN board invest more in its reputation in a volatile economic context, than it had in previous, more prosperous years.**

Tactics were to commission a piece of research from Aberdeen Business School, called 'Riding the Rapids', based on **interviews with CEOs from major oil companies in the UK, USA and Canada.** The interviewees represented a significant section of the industry, employing more than **740,000 people, in over 130 countries.** This research examined how industry leaders were steering and sustaining their businesses through the global recession. It was the **first analysis of international oil business leaders' opinion** in the new economic climate.

PSN's board were initially unconvinced despite a modest budget request of £25K to deliver four campaign events in Aberdeen, Houston, Calgary and Abu Dhabi. Louise then introduced **law firm McGrigors LLP** as joint research sponsor and negotiated event support from **accountancy giant Ernst & Young (E&Y)** to make costs more competitive.

The campaign's objectives were to

1. build **global awareness** of PSN by showcasing the company's **thought-leadership credentials** with media and key customers.
2. provide **sustained media coverage** in key locations to support **business development activity.** Specifically to ensure a 'good hook' for launch of PSN in Western Canada and raise PSN's UK profile before and during an important trade exhibition Offshore Europe 2009 (OE09).
3. raise the **global profile of sponsors** McGrigors LLP and E&Y.
4. provide an opportunity for leaders from all companies to **meet with potential customers.**
5. prove value for money and a **tangible return on investment** in a tough economic climate.

IMPLEMENTATION

Significant planning took place to ensure the research unearthed new, stimulating, positive findings. There were frequently **tensions between academic and business priorities** during this planning phase but all parties were motivated to complete the first global survey of oil leaders in the new climate. At this early stage, a **brand identity** was created to capture the imagination of employees, customers and staff of the participating companies.

The **original research** presented by the university was over sixty pages long with no clear angle. This was **rigorously edited**, by Louise and the Dean of the Business School, to create a media-friendly summary containing **two strong angles.** The first angle was released in the UK and USA in August 2009 as a mini-preview to spark interest in the research. The second angle was launched at **glossy industry events** in Aberdeen and Calgary (1st September), Houston (15th September) and Abu Dhabi (20th October). This calendar was carefully coordinated to **maximise client exposure** for directors who attended each event. The **UK and Calgary events broke the news** on the same day, followed by the **Houston and Abu Dhabi events taking a slight different angle** later in the month. PR support in each market translated the UK media angle to ensure it excited local journalists. Formidable project management skills were required to handle such an unwieldy piece of research and its delivery in four international markets, manage the expectations and demands of three global companies and an academic institution, yet **retain a distinct story.**

CREATIVITY – WHAT MAKES THE CAMPAIGN STAND OUT?

At a time when the PSN board was naturally inclined to claw back spending on PR, Louise persuaded the company to maintain investment and introduced two corporate partners to secure a high profile project. With a sharper boardroom eye on value, the stakes were high and this ambitious project had to deliver. It **creatively pooled manpower resources** from participating organisations to stretch the budget. **Pushing ahead with PR, when competitors were pulling back,** was an innately creative thing to do. The subject matter was also creative as it tackled issues not yet discussed publically in a notoriously conservative industry. There was a conscious drive to **'say it first'.**

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EVALUATION, MEASUREMENT AND COST EFFECTIVENESS.

FINAL RESULTS AGAINST OBJECTIVES

This ambitious project generated **164 media articles in UK, Canada, USA and Australia throughout September and October 2009** (campaign objective 2). This coverage included 5 hits specifically supporting PSN's launch in Western Canada and PSN occupied the **front page headline story of the Energy newspaper the month of OE09** (objective2). This undoubtedly increased PSN brand visibility as the trade show attracts over 30,000 industry visitors. The research was further endorsed at the trade show by Scotland's **First Minister Alex Salmond** who literally quoted from the research at the launch breakfast and waved a Rapids-branded document above his head (objectives 1 and 3)!

Overall, coverage generated was **worth over £450K¹** and created over **77million opportunities to see** positive 'industry leadership' stories about sponsors in global print, broadcast and online media (objective2). Remarkably, the project was **delivered under budget** and generated a **return on investment of over 1978%²**. For individual sponsors, the return is even higher proving phenomenal **cost effectiveness** (objective5). Coverage was focused in the countries that held events (UK, Canada, USA and Middle East) but Rapids-themed coverage was also generated in Australia (objective4).

'Riding the Rapids' made a crucial contribution to McGrigors LLP ranking in **FT Innovative Lawyers** report in October 2009 (objective3). The project was also **imitated by one of PSN's competitors** who, one month after the campaign closed, created a **copycat event** and recession-themed industry debate called 'Riding the Storm'. Imitation is undoubtedly the greatest form of flattery (and proves we met objective 1)! Most importantly, over 250 senior executives, directors and CEOs attended the international events (objective4). This generated **significant positive stakeholder feedback in UK, US, Canada and Abu Dhabi** (objective1) as the campaign proved that PSN and sponsors are "oil and gas leaders [that] see beyond the horizon and are not caught up just getting through today" (Houston Business Journal, 09.10.09).

BUDGET: Category b, £11k to £50K

¹ £359,488 in UK, Canada and Australia. All US coverage was online and worth approximately £100,000. Stats from independent monitoring agency Pressdata Ltd.

² ROI% = (PR value generated/costs of research & events) x 100