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## **Bulldog Reporter's Daily 'Dog The Leading Source of PR Views, News and Tools**

*Brian Pittman's spotlight this week: Michael G. Cherson, President, Success Communications; Chair-Elect, Public Relations Society of America*

"I think you will see some real impacts of Obama's election and new administration on the PR business and even PRSA's strategic direction in the year ahead," says Michael Cherson, PRSA's incoming chair and chief public relations counselor at Success Communications. "Obama is a communicator. He embraces and legitimizes Web 2.0 in technology and spirit," believes Cherson, who in 2006 finished a three-year term on the national board of directors of PRSA, and who also served recently as chair of the PRSA Strategic Planning and liaison to the PRSA Leadership Continuum Task Force Board.

"Because of this, I think you will see the communication function at all government agencies become more robust — even as it relates to improving our image abroad. You'll see an uptick in how we communicate globally and a commitment to the spirit of PR globally," he believes.

"The new administration will give us many new opportunities as communicators, and PRSA as an association," continues Cherson, a 16-year industry veteran. "For example, our April board meeting will be in D.C.—and we plan to meet with members of the new administration then."

Similarly, Cherson says he expects to see growth in the association's multicultural, diversity and multicultural professional interest sections. "These things look to be key areas of focus for an Obama administration, and we'll also be looking to each of those committees for leadership and initiatives. These communities are already in place internally, but our charge will now to be to unleash them externally and have them educate all of us."

Read on for specifics into what Cherson sees ahead for the practice and for PRSA — as well as for a quick look into how the current economic crisis may impact PRSA's plans for 2009:

### **What's the vibe of your membership base — are they worried about the economy?**

Certainly, and we're concerned and watching it. The data we're seeing from the publicly traded PR communication firms and even the council anecdotally is that PR has been flat, with a possible small increase. But there is concern about what the future holds. So

we're cautiously optimistic — hoping for the best and planning for the worst, as members should expect us to do.

**Do you plan on surveying members on this?**

We always do surveys — but yes, you can expect some surveys regarding what's happening to budgets moving forward. We'll do that throughout the year. One of PRSA's initiatives is to be more data driven.

**So what economic indicators are you seeing right now that support your cautious optimism?**

Well, our membership numbers have actually increased. And attendance at professional development sessions has been strong. Our conference in Detroit actually exceeded expectations in terms of sponsorships and attendance goals — I think there were 3,000 people there. On a different note, the "USC Annenberg School of Communications General Accepted Practices Study for Public Relations" recently said PR is more recession resistant than ever before. I really think we're seeing that. People are realizing the value of trust and reputation now more than ever before, because they're seeing what's going on with Wall Street, Main Street and Pennsylvania Avenue.

**Will it be tougher in the year ahead to "sell" the idea of membership in PRSA? What is PRSA doing to react to and support members struggling with the economic crisis?**

My feeling is, to be successful, especially in a down economy, you need three things: First is having knowledge that allows you to be more powerful in the marketplace, and that gives you the ability to re-tool by learning best practices. Second is having a network that gives you access to more people and new ideas. I equate PRSA to a health club. If you join, but don't pick up a weight, you get nothing out of it. So become active to build your network and relationships. That's how you can amass power in down times.

And third is to make your own luck. You will not make your luck cloistered in your office talking to people you know. Get out there, learn new things and gain new experiences. PRSA is the greatest job insurance you could ever buy. It will provide you with knowledge, networking and opportunity.

One thing I do want to state on this note is that we're also looking to become even more valuable as a resource for members facing hard economic times. One example is an initiative we'll be launching soon to provide health, vision, dental and business insurance for our members. PRSA derives no income and no financial interest from this. But we've negotiated reduced rates on these things to help members in tough times. So, if you're losing your job and need health insurance, PRSA will have an option for you. If you're looking to start your own firm — we'll have an option for you. That will be a huge offering this year. While we hope a lot of our members won't be needing these packages, our expectation is to have this launch in February.

**What are your business goals for the year ahead — how has the slowing economy impacted your 2009 budget?**

We're still working on our budgets — but like I said, we are cautiously optimistic. We recognize the realities of our time. But we're also confident that if we increase our value proposition, it becomes an investment and not an expense. Membership works out to 88 cents a day. So have your coffee at home and invest in yourself instead. This is job insurance. For specific budget numbers, we'll be reviewing those in the next couple of weeks. We wanted to first see how the conference went — and I haven't seen the figures for our planning yet.

**Students coming out in this economy are worried about jobs — are there any PRSSA initiatives on the docket to address this? What's your advice to younger practitioners regarding landing jobs in the industry — what resources can they turn to?**

They're coming out with the skill sets the market is calling for — their understanding of social media is just one example. They're also coming out at an interesting time. While the economy may not be as robust, the market is still calling for their skill sets. There is still hiring. The job board at PRSA is still vibrant and postings are still increasing. As for my advice to incoming practitioners: First would be to manage your expectations — it may take longer now, but the opportunities will be out there. I think we'll start to see an uptick in 2009, actually. Also: Know your strengths — social media, again, is a good example. Follow your heart and not what you think is cool and trendy. For example, flocking to a hot sector that's not what you love to do will hurt you. Be passionate about what you do. Not only will your cover letter and interview be better, but you will be better at your job. Finally: Think, "Knowledge, network and make my own luck." That's what PRSA gives you.

**What is the biggest challenge facing PRSA — and how can it be resolved?**

Realizing our potential is the biggest challenge. PRSA has to do a better job at communicating with our members and the profession at large. We must step up our communication efforts internally and externally. Practicing what we preach — it's our greatest challenge and opportunity.

**What is the biggest misunderstanding you think members and even the PR trades have about PRSA — how can it be resolved?**

First and foremost, people see PRSA just as 33 Maiden Lane in New York City. That's not the case. It includes our 109 chapters, our sections, PRSSA and so on. People think of the offerings coming out of New York when they're actually coming from chapters ranging from Fairbanks to Fort Lauderdale. People need a broader view of PRSA and think of the breadth and depth of what we offer. There's this misconception that it's all about headquarters.

Equally important is the "pick up the weights" analogy I referenced earlier: PRSA can help you if you realize and take advantage of the many benefits we offer. For example, judging awards is a huge opportunity to sit at a table with your peers, meet new people and get access to the best ideas — all for free. Our professional resource center is another example. It's staffed with people at headquarters who can give you 20 years of data. Take advantage of it. If you're not using this tool for research, you're missing a

great opportunity. So, it's all about the community — not headquarters. As a community, PRSA is priceless.

**Why did you take on the role of chair for 2009 — what drove you to it?**

I am a second generation PR counselor. My father started this firm 50 years ago — and I want to give back to the profession that has given to me. Also, I often hear PR professionals complain about this, that or other things. My theory is, "Lead, follow or get out of the way." So I chose to step up and help address some of the challenges facing our profession. I am that kind of person. On a personal level, it has been the greatest professional-development phase of my life. Leaders never stop learning. This has been a great opportunity to improve my leadership skills and gain a better understanding of the profession. I am getting as much out of it as I am putting into it — and we hope all members take a similar charge. Take a leadership position. Get involved. It will improve your career and the profession.

**What's your "personal brand" — how would you put it? How does that inform what you want to bring to the role of chair?**

I am the youngest PRSA chair and the first to be a second generation counselor. So that defines my approach to this job and speaks to opportunities for all our members. Those that know me know my passion and my commitment. I feel proud in saying I'm authentic. I'm a guy from Jersey. What you see is what you get.

On a more personal note — I'm a twin. I've always been "we" and never "me." So I'm very collaborative. From the minute I was conceived, I have shared everything. I also believe in surrounding myself with people smarter than I am, which is very easy to do. Beyond that, I'm also dyslexic and have ADD. I think that gives me a unique perspective: We live in a multi-tasking world, and that lends itself to my DNA. People with dyslexia are often outcomes driven, and that defines me — I'm not about getting bogged down in the minutiae. That's a key part of who I am. Finally, I have learned to put my trust in others. That's a big part of who I am and what I am about.

A favorite quote of mine from John Adams sort of sums it up for me: "If my actions can inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, I will be a leader." If PRSA can help people do those things, then it, too, will be successful.