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JACKPOT

PROVEN WAYS TO WIN MORE BUSINESS





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How fast things change these days! It seems like just yesterday Starbucks was pouring it on opening new stores. Then before you could down that luscious latte, they're closing them. **Up until a few minutes ago, Boomers were getting ready to retire. Now they're trying to hang on to their jobs as their retirement savings evaporate.** Last year, we worried about our competitors. Now we're concerned about our own company.

All this is enough to make us wonder what the immediate future holds. Some businesses are worried about getting through the storm, while others are considering new possibilities.

The year ahead will be demanding and not always friendly. However, it can be a good year for those willing to make the right effort. Here are several marketing and sales concepts that can drive success in the year ahead:

Get your customers thinking about possibilities. Disney got it right with its "Celebrate" promotion. They didn't attempt to lure visitors by pouring on the discounts. Their mission was to capture the imagination with thoughts of celebrations — Birthdays, True love, Triumphs, Reunions and, yes, Your First Visit.

Rather than telling us to buy, buy, buy, the "Celebrate" eBulletin involved visitors in creating a memorable experience. With excitement driving interest, it was Disney at its best — and marketing at its best, too.

Demonstrate strength. The most serious mistake a company can make in the present economic environment is *weakness*. It was a lack of consumer confidence in General Motors, Ford and Chrysler that drove customers away, not just gas guzzling trucks and SUVs. No one wants to do business with a company that they perceive as weak or shaky—or about to go out of business.

Don't let your company be perceived as a bad bet to do business with. Make sure you're visible, demonstrate strength, and let it be known that you will be there tomorrow for your customers.

Craft a clear and compelling message and stay with it. General Motors has major problems, but the Cadillac division gets the message right for its CTS-V 09 sedan. In fact, it's truly memorable: "When you turn on your car, does it return the favor?" That will pull in the customers — perhaps

those who may, for the first time, begin rethinking their admiration for "the ultimate driving machine."

Think performance. There's no room for excuses. Good intentions are gone. It's results that count. Unfortunately, it appears that a substantial portion of the work force—including top executives—didn't read the memo.

Twenty-five percent of employees spend about one-quarter of their work time doing "personal stuff" online, according to network security consultant VOCO. At that rate, the cost to American business is more than \$200 billion a year. Add in text messaging and it paints a troublesome workplace picture — one that explains why productivity continues to drop.

Both companies and workers must now pass the even more demanding performance test.

Avoid creating a stream of email sales pitches. My 2005 Honda Element is terrific, but why did Honda wait until an economic downturn to let me know the importance of regular maintenance? 'They need the business' is the answer, although they attempt to couch the copy in terms of helping *me*. Customers recognize such thinly veiled sales pitches. That's when they start looking for someone who can *really* help them.

Stop the happy talk. If there was ever a time to get serious, it's now. People are worried, so put away all the happy-go-lucky, "everything's great" stuff. No one wants to hear it.

The only time customers are happy today is when they see that we make their agendas our top priority.

Act like you understand the situation. When someone inquired about a particular salesperson, the business owner said, "I don't know what we're going to do. He spends his time on the golf course." In good times, that may be the

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place to be several times a week, but not now. If we aren't spending every possible moment helping customers, we're not doing the job.

Get knowledgeable. Spend less time on ESPN and more on Bloomberg.com and the *Wall Street Journal*. We all need to understand the larger picture, not just our own product or service. Frankly, most of the salespeople we see are so blinded by their own objectives, they don't have a clue as to what their customers are facing or the problems they need to solve. They are only interested in selling something. That's a formula for failure today.

Do what the customer wants. It's time to clear our minds of such nonsense as "It's our policy" or "I am not sure we can do that." Today, it's all about working with customers to make sure we make *doing business with us* as easy for them as possible. Ask customers what they want — then give it to them. Of course, there will be exceptions, but they should not be allowed to be the rule.

Build your database. One of the major weaknesses in most businesses is contact information that's sloppy, inaccurate, incomplete, non-existent or poorly managed.

No business can dare minimize the value of a contact information system as a competitive advantage. Yet, *most* fail to recognize that building a proper database is the only way to cultivate prospects and communicate effectively with customers. If we don't know who and where they are, we can't market to them.

Stop pushing and start pulling. If you try pushing customers to buy in this economic situation, you're dead. They won't stand for it.

Buying decisions will take longer than they do now — much longer. Try to change that rhythm and you're done. Once you understand the customer's particular buying process, spend time figuring out how to fit into it — not change it.

Change can be disastrous. For 20 years, the compelling and memorable, "It's Everywhere You Want to Be" powered VISA's marketing. Then along came marketers who wanted to make their mark and ushered in "Life Takes Visa," a wimpish tagline if there ever was one.

Don't do things just because they're different, even if the CEO suggests it. There's no room for mistakes and there's

no room for whim and personal preference. It's easy to lose your way. Just ask VISA.

Professionalize your communications. The weakest link between a company and its customers is its communications. For the most part, the letters, emails, memos, newsletters and reports are so poorly written, confusing and incomplete that they damage customer relationships. Many don't make any sense at all. This is where differentiation and branding begins. When communication is done well, it pleases customers and increases loyalty.

Take a lesson from Microsoft. When you complete a call for support, the person assisting you *always* concludes with this question: "Is there anything else I can help you with?" They don't assume communication is complete until the customer is satisfied and actually says, "No."

Have a plan and stay on it. Most annual business plans are little more than window dressing and are quickly shelved. Everyone knows they're a useless exercise, except those who put employees through the annual painful exercise.

The annual business plan fails to deal with what's needed to make it work: *a process to assure follow through*. This is why the weekly "staff meeting" should be transformed into the weekly "business meeting" with a focus on one question: "Who's doing what to whom and when?" That makes a difference because it's accountability with teeth.

Plant the seeds of tomorrow. Too many salespeople view prospecting as nothing more than lining up the next sale. That's a fallacy.

In reality, prospecting is a process in which *customers* make the decision to do business with *you*. Few buyers move quickly today. Many won't make a decision until their backs are against the wall.

This means that no one ever knows when a "no" will become a "yes." It happens when it's least expected. When that happens, the business goes to whoever is there. It could be you, but it may be your competitor.

If we think longer term and stay close to prospects as well as customers, it will be a good tomorrow.

So, here they are — ideas for making the most of 2009. These are legs that strengthen your sales and marketing stool. They're practical and can help us get our arms around the issues that will really make a difference. 