

It's time to get back to basics in sales

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I'm figuring out my forecast for 2009, and beyond. My business sells a few million in services each year, and we're hoping to hold our own, or be slightly up this year. Any hints on what to do in sales to make it through the recession and come back stronger than ever?

What can you do to ride out this recession? Ask yourself 4 questions. How many of my customers are still going to be around on the other side of this recession? How do I build loyalty with the customers I want to keep? What can I do to add more customers now? What additional products or services will my customers want when their cash flow frees up?

In a recession it's all about flow: customer, prospect, information, cash. Also, keep your focus on the long term. This recession will end. When it does end, the company with the best client list, strongest sales skills and most reasonable quality / price / profit offer wins.

What kind of customers do you want? Many of our clients are actually forecasting that they'll be up this year. They have focused on sales and marketing skills, and built financial stockpiles. These are the kinds of customers you want to do business with now. They're healthy and taking action to stay that way.

Who do you want to avoid? The remainder of the recession is expected to be hard on many business owners. Those who have played it too close to the margin in terms of pricing, those who have depended too much on loans to cover shortfalls, and those who have not built up a strong, thriving client base could find this year hard going. It's not too late, but time is running short for those who don't pay attention. These clients are not your future. They can hold you back or draw your company over the edge if you risk too much on them and they don't turn it around.

How do you build loyalty? Ask yourself, "What can I do to help my good clients, prospects and vendors get through this tough stretch?" And don't focus too much on the bottom line. Cash flow and connections also matter. Exchange services. Make referrals. Introduce people. Network more. Focus on the survivors. Ask folks what they need, and then try to help them get it. Think of it as being part of a community, where each of you helps the other stay on track and get stronger.

Communicate with customers and vendors about the measures you're taking to weather the recession. It's okay to be honest that these are tough times. Share advice and ideas with each other. Look for the smart ones, the learners, who are determined to get better at weathering the recession as they go along.

What can you do to add more customers now? Think of low cost offers you can make, to build starter relations with new clients. Get people and businesses onto your client list, used to paying your company for something, anything, and they'll be more likely to continue to buy from you when the economy takes off.

Keep an eye on your competitors. If they're weakening don't hesitate to step in. Savvy business owners pick up client lists, ancillary business lines, good quality used equipment, and well trained employees during a recession.

See resources flowing into your business. Look for good sales people who have been thrown out on the street. Distinguish between producers and also-ran's. Right now it's time to get back to basics in sales. If necessary, use this time as an opportunity to clean house in sales. It may sound tough, but you need to focus on areas where you can do the most good for your business, and being productive in sales is job #1 during a recession.

Develop a good underground network of information. Keep notes each week on what you're hearing and observing. Spot trends. What do people want? What are people, and businesses letting go of? Where is focus shifting? What's new? Become an astute observer and you'll likely be ready with the right concepts, products and services, at the right price, to meet growing demand when the market takes off.

In closing, it's important for all of us to keep in mind that the U.S. economy, when it takes off, is big and powerful. At the end of the recession, the bottom feeding competitors have been weeded out. Demand for new goods and services takes over. Then, the depth and breadth of your customer list, and the skill of your sales department, will help your company to get swept along in the rising tide.

Looking for a good book? Try *Recession Storming: Thriving in Downturns through Superior Marketing, Pricing and Product Strategies*, by Rupert Hart.

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If you are a business owner and you have a question or would like to discuss some aspect of your business, call [1.877.238.3535](tel:18772383535) or send an email to AskAndi@StrategyLeaders.com.

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