

Marketing in Turbulent Times

May you live in interesting times. Is that ancient expression a curse or a blessing? I think it depends on what you define to be “interesting” and more importantly how you adapt to it.

If you define interesting to mean unpredictable, challenging and threatening - then clearly we are living in interesting times. Business these days is more like shooting the rapids in a rubber raft than canoeing in a duck pond.

It's too easy to be mesmerized by the danger of capsizing. If you focus on the rocks – that's where you will go. The secret is to look for and steer to the high water and paddle like a fiend.

Survival is not the goal

If you set your sights on surviving you could slip and sink. If you set your target as thriving then you might flourish.

How do you thrive in these turbulent waters?

Marketing is the result of all the messages that you and your staff send. In fact your staff sends more powerful marketing messages than all the advertising you ever do. Therefore marketing becomes the end result of almost every business decision you make.

Think long term

Don't make knee-jerk decisions especially about business strategy. Gather as much relevant information as you can. Seek the advice of people you respect. Be clear on your purpose. Examine both the short term and long term effects of major decisions. Once you decide, act quickly and confidently. Your staff will be looking to you for leadership and hope. Be open to course corrections when and as needed while clearly focused on the objectives and purpose.

Prepare for disaster

The fire department prepares for disaster – they don't focus on it or obsess about it. They think, plan, acquire the best tools and rehearse their response so they can move swiftly when and if needed. Where are you exposed and how can you protect yourself? When you are shooting the rapids it is foolish to save money by not buying life vests.

Review expenditures

Don't make across-the-board cuts. That's a political response and just dumb. Instead categorize expenditures and investments into four categories.

- A. Items that are needed because of the turbulent times to keep you above water or deal with disaster. Plus items that generate a good return. These are new or increased expenditures.
- B. Items that are mission critical and need to be maintained as is.

- C. Items that provide variable return. Peg the expenditure level to the conditions and vary as conditions change. Treat it like an exchange rate.
- D. Items of questionable value. Eliminate them or phase them out.

Review training

Review does not mean reduce or eliminate. Training can be more important during turbulent times. This is when your skills and those of your staff should be at their best. You don't want to be losing sales because of poor customer service or quality control. Categorize your training needs into three categories.

- A. Key individuals that will steer you through the turbulent times. Provide individualized coaching or training to them. Invest strongly in your best assets.
- B. Departments that need to stay sharp and ahead of your competition. Provide group training, tele-seminars or your own attention to improving skills sets.
- C. Staff that need to be motivated and reminded of purpose and the little things that make the difference. Buy them each a copy of a book that best conveys that message. Ask each person to report at weekly meetings on an assigned chapter in that book. Make everyone feel important.

It only takes one person's mistake or sabotage to sink your raft.

Review advertising

Too many companies stupidly make major cuts in advertising during turbulent times. My guess is that they did not review their advertising during the good times. Categorize your advertising into three categories.

- A. Advertising that is measureable and has demonstrated a profitable return. Continue to measure as you increase your investment in this profitable avenue. Unfortunately too many companies don't measure their return on advertising or they don't design their ads in a way that allows the results to be measureable. So they have nothing in this category. A shame.
- B. Advertising that has gained market recognition and that you believe to be working. You just don't have a clue how profitable this venue is. Start to build in some measurement indicators. Vary the ads and measure. Then increase or reduce investment appropriately.
- C. Advertising that is merely "me too" ads. You bought an ad because your competitor did. It might be a waste of money but you don't know. Reduce the expenditure or eliminate it.

Build relationships

In turbulent times nothing is more important than relationships. We will warmly remember those who suffered with us or helped us through the turbulent times. Invest strongly in strengthening the relationship with your best clients. Segment your clients into three categories:

- A. Best clients. Divert more attention to their needs. Instruct your staff accordingly. Jump through hoops for these clients. Offer them additional value and services to help them. Communicate with them more often.
- B. Average clients. Maintain service levels and pricing. Attempt to upgrade them to A clients by introducing additional services.
- C. Pain-in-the-ass clients. Don't let them bully you into reducing your prices. Instead you might reduce your level of service to them. Offer them the choice of upgrading or leaving. You'll have less stress in your life.

Important note for you

Relationships are more important than branding – especially during turbulent times. It is the far more profitable choice for small and medium sized enterprises. Remember that big business invests in branding because they cannot build relationships. Don't be fooled by the branding hype.

Online Social Media

Don't hide. Use the Internet to keep your message and name in front of people. If you haven't yet created your blog, this is a good time to start. Post regular tips, news and positive messages. Register and maintain your accounts on social networking sites like LinkedIn.com, Plaxo.com and Facebook.com. Explore the use of YouTube.com and Flickr.com to publish product news and demonstrations. Barack Obama, the new US president used these tools to successfully promote his presidential campaign and he plans to use them to convey his messages to the American people and the world.

May you thrive in interesting times.

IP© George Torok simplifies marketing for the confused and stressed entrepreneur. He identifies fundamental marketing principles and offers practical techniques. Get your free copy of "50 Power Marketing Ideas" when you register for your free Power Marketing Tips at www.PowerMarketing.ca. George Torok is available for media interviews and speaking engagements. Call 905-335-1997.

When you have the choice to invest in branding or invest in relationships – choose relationships.