



Preparing for the Recovery

The faithful know it's coming...

By Trish Brock

It may not feel much like a recovery—more like three steps forward and two steps backward, but we will eventually pull out of the current stagnant economic climate and people and businesses will get on with their lives.

But those lives as we knew them are changed and as businesses reposition themselves, reinvent and broaden their offering, they also must prepare for the recovery to come.

As difficult as business is now, being caught flat footed and unprepared to manage an increase in demand could be even more detrimental to the long-term life of your dealership.

Below are some areas to consider as we lurch towards better times:

Differentiate your business.

Define your unique attributes. This is not a new strategy, but many dealers don't understand what it means, appreciate its importance or know in any useful way how it can be done.

Different is not being the same. It means being known for something that your competitors are not. It means having different conversations than your competitors are having.

Everyone is selling furniture, space planning and installation. But what value do you bring beyond all that and why should customers choose you? For dealers, the answer is rarely about the product, but don't tell your manufacturer that.

I spoke with one dealer recently who told me quite seriously that their differentiator was that they worked hard. Really? Does that mean no one else is working hard?

Another dealer declared their differentiator to be their full product and service offering—soup to nuts so to speak. Again, I wondered if they had taken a look at the competition recently since many dealers can make the same claim.

Be clear about what your market thinks about your dealership.

Few of us see ourselves as others see us, and that includes businesses. The market's perception is your reality.

Being open minded to hearing the good as well as the bad will give you a lot of information about how to better differentiate as well as make improvements moving forward.

After all, getting better puts you in good position now and will help propel your efforts in the future.

Innovate.

Webster's defines it as, "to introduce new methods, change in the way of doing things." We have all heard that we need to innovate, but when something new is suggested, how often is it really embraced and tried?

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Get out of the box. If something is done in nine steps, do you continue to challenge yourself on how to do it eight steps, and then seven? I have witnessed too often the introduction of new ideas, only to see them dismissed because no one else has tried them yet.

Hard times call for fresh ideas and new solutions to new challenges. Hint: The first one out of the gate gets the head start and therefore becomes known for being the first and innovative. These are great attributes, will help you differentiate and will help develop stronger practices.

Don't confuse "busy" with "productive."

Most people may feel like world champs at whack-a-mole these days, but stop for a moment and get some perspective.

We all know we must work "smart" and now is the time to redefine what that means. It's easy to get sucked into the daily crisis, but chances are good that many are repeat crises which suggests improved systems/procedures might mitigate some of the "busy" activity.

Without tackling some of these issues, they will hamper your business when activity picks up and give "busy" a whole new meaning (and not in the good way).

Grow your people and keep them.

Everyone wants more and better salespeople. But the reality is that many have left the industry and more continue to do so. And with them goes a lot of valuable experience.

Product training is obviously necessary, but much of the sales training is built

around the products instead of developing professional skills in areas such as communication, leadership development and presentations.

Help your people develop their strengths, listen to their suggestions on how they can produce more and invest in their professional growth and development. Don't tell them to sell more—show them how. Helping them grow will pay dividends for growing your business.

Equip your people.

One dealer told me recently he would spend some money on marketing and sales materials when his people sold more. In the world of sports, that would be like telling the football team they would be getting pads and helmets once they start winning some games.

Yes, every dollar has to be scrutinized in this economy, but if you are committed to being in the game, you must have the right equipment. "Suit up" your people.

Be visible.

Have a good website, do interesting email blasts, host creative events, sponsor industry activities and give your people support materials.

Your competitors are doing all these things, and if you aren't, you can't expect to be top of mind in your market.

Thinking that "feet on the street" can accomplish the coverage that smart marketing will is exactly what your competition hopes you will think.

Good marketing will enhance your sales efforts, make cold calls warmer, enhance your name recognition and give your people the help they need.

Stop relying on your manufacturer.

While every dealer believes their product to be the best—and there are some truly amazing products available these days—the reality is that many buyers see commercial furniture as a commodity item and take the view that all products are pretty much all equally good and can solve any problems.

Trying to differentiate by product is what your manufacturer does. You need to differentiate by your services, your track record, your support, your professionalism, your ability to solve problems, your experienced people, etc. You must be known for your own unique attributes in your own community.

Let your sales people sell.

In these times of cut backs and pressures to do more with less, the engine of your dealership is your salespeople and they need to be out selling.

Take a look at time spent selling vs. time spent doing take offs and other administrative tasks. Consider also that the more successful a sales person is, the more encumbered they become with administrivia, with even less time to sell.

Don't penalize your best people by burdening them with non-revenue producing activities. Wouldn't time be better spent by a salesperson networking for new business at an event rather than counting panels?

Position them and your dealer to be on top of developments in the market. Take away as many obstacles as possible and let them do what they do best — sell.

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“Because we have always done it this way” doesn’t work with new economy challenges.

Now is the time to evaluate the efficiencies of your internal processes and ask yourself if “best practices” are really simply “common practices.”

Can steps be taken to shorten the number of “hand offs” from proposal through installation?

Do you track error rates and implement new methods in order to reduce them? Is it “shame and blame” when things go wrong, or does your dealer grow from past experiences?

Learn.

Read, explore new ideas and try different approaches. “Back to basics” and reinvigorating “block and tackle” tactics worked for another era.

While some things may not have changed, the business climate, how people communicate and work places have changed dramatically. Applying road weary ideas to a new age and generation will not get you very far. You must be adapting and changing not only ways of doing business, but your attitude and perspectives as well, if you want to come out of this recession as a contender.

Have a positive attitude.

We all know this and at times it begins to sound trite, but your clients and people need for you to be upbeat and optimistic. Put another way, being fearful, cynical or pessimistic will not instill confidence, and doesn’t inspire anyone to do anything besides become a “victim” and make excuses for why they can’t be successful.

Model positive behavior and give the people around you the energy and inspiration to also be positive.

There’s no going back and things will never be the same. We can choose to look longingly in the rear view mirror or we can jump feet first into the unknown and prepare for the next phase of business.

Being receptive to our changing environment and preparing for it with new approaches will put you in a good position to thrive as our economic climate improves. And it will!

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