

In a Recession, Put Everyone in Marketing

Are you facing falling customer orders? Slower renewals? Cancellations? Requests for ever-deeper discounts?

So now what? When you can't (and shouldn't) cut any further, you can leverage the creativity of the people on your team. This is truly the time when employees are your most important assets -- for real, not just in slogans. In a recession, everyone should be in marketing.

Motivated employees contribute to creative thinking that can help retain current customers and identify new ones.

Here are five suggestions:

1. Increase customer contact and communication.

Financial turbulence sometimes leads managers to over-emphasize pleasing banks or investment analysts while appearing to take customers for granted. But as we all know, without customers, there is no business.

Senior executives, regardless of function, should become personal ambassadors to major customers, thanking them for their business and making it clear that they want to help them succeed. But don't stop there. People throughout the ranks can reach out to customers - perhaps a personal note or a phone call to provide news or ask questions. Customers will know you care, you will be better informed, staff will feel more involved, and unexpected opportunities might arise.

2. Start looking for new markets now. Companies dependent on a few large customers are particularly vulnerable to changes in their customers' fortunes, but all companies need the flexibility to move quickly into promising markets. In uncertain times, managers should increase efforts to identify additional uses for company products and additional sources of customers for the future.

Creative thinking can find opportunities to offset losses from current customers. Starting research now on less-familiar industries or parts of the world will help prepare managers to move quickly when conditions improve.

This might involve sales calls, tests of a new channel, postings on Web sites targeting new areas or industry segments, sending more people to speak at industry conferences and cultivate relationships - good investments even if they seem like the first candidates for cutting. During slow times, employees who might otherwise be idle could be deployed to gather information by discussions with end users. If travel costs are too high, the telephone can be augmented by Internet research.

3. Invest in employee morale. When employees fear for their jobs, worries about family finances drain energy and increase the temptation to stay home on the slightest excuse. When morale is down, productivity and attention to customers suffer, right at the time

that you most need zero defects, efficient teamwork, and cheerful voices handling customer questions.

Too many companies treat employees as costs to be cut, when they really should show employees how important they are. Managers can greet employees personally and thank them for their contributions. Small tokens of appreciation and enjoyment, such as a weekend outing with families or a food festival with employee contributions as a break during working hours, go a long way to keep people motivated to perform well.

4. Emphasize and reward small wins. Innovation is an on-going task, but turbulent times increase the need to get everyone involved in undertaking small improvements that can be easily and quickly implemented - to find a cost-saving efficiency, improve the work environment, or convince customers to buy a little more.

People at lower levels and in unexpected places might see how to make a greater difference for the business, but no one has asked them, or they thought the ideas were too small to mention. A program that actively seeks these ideas and rewards them -- publicity, appreciation, or even a small portion of the cost-saving or revenue gains -- can strengthen the company immediately. Motivation increases, and customers see a company that is always ahead of the curve in terms of new thinking.

5. Stick with your values. There is always a temptation to cut corners when times are tough. Managers should avoid desperate moves that could damage them or the company later - no accounting tricks, no shoddy merchandise, and no compromises with ethics, such as "gifts" to a purchasing agent. Reminders about company values can reinforce solidarity and increase the confidence that customers have in the company.

Challenging times divide winners from losers. Winners survive because they never forget the important enduring truth: High quality products and services are created by engaged employees who know and care about customers.