

TURNING ADVERSITY INTO OPPORTUNITY

BY BILL HOGG

Despite the doom and gloom of today's economic downturn, smart leaders look to history for learning. History tells us that now is not the time to cut important foundational programs, but to leverage current conditions for competitive advantage so they emerge from this economic downturn better positioned for success.

One area that seems to be under pressure is workforce size and employee engagement. Many firms will cut back in this area; some will see this as an opportunity to strengthen their teams through strategic hiring, downsizing and internal communications.

In these times of uncertainty, it is especially important to go above and beyond to strengthen employee engagement. Leaders may set the direction, but employees make things happen, including building and maintaining competitive advantage. Happy, engaged employees aligned with your corporate values, goals and strategy produce amazing results. A culture of pride of ownership permeates the entire organization and results in better products, better customer service and better business results.

The first step (and arguably the most important) is communicate, communicate, communicate. Don't sit in your office and send out e-mails; walk around and reach out to folks personally, and coach your managers to follow your lead. Really talk to employees about what is going on - and listen to what they say; it's amazing what you can learn from them.

If you don't already regularly survey your employees, it's a good idea to have a confidential employee survey program to get the feedback you can't get in person. These can be set up easily using free online survey tools.

However, to be effective, you must act on the results and communicate early and often that you plan to do so. And remember that this is not a once-and-done process.

Your customers and distributors also need reassurance in these difficult times. Making an effort to connect with them now will pay dividends over the long term. Brand loyalty leads to competitive advantage, and customer loyalty boils down to excellent customer service, which enables trust and confidence. Now is the time to reach out and communicate.

Leverage technology tools to enhance regular ongoing communication. Electronic newsletters, wikis and blogs are powerful ways to regularly update your employees, customers and distributors and get their feedback. Streaming video and podcast updates about how you are weathering the storm also are excellent tools.

Look for quick wins that will serve customers and stimulate sales in the current economy. Are there new products with lower pricing you could offer? Would a review of their current services to ensure they are maximizing any discounts or product combinations make sense? These initiatives demonstrate you appreciate their situation and the lower margin pain you feel now will be rewarded when customers come back for your products and services when things turn around. Plus they are a great opportunity to talk to your customers and potentially identify issues before they consider moving their business elsewhere.

187 Willow Farm Lane
Aurora, Ontario L4G 6K5
(905) 841-3191
bill@billhogg.ca
www.billhogg.ca



BILL
HOGG
& ASSOCIATES

Also, make sure you employees are ready to respond with a higher level of empathy and support for the customer. Now is not the time to offer bad customer service, as emotions are running high and customers will vote with their feet.

Times may be difficult, but regular, meaningful ongoing communication will ensure everyone is focused on the goals of the organization and working in the same direction.

Bill works with senior leaders to measurably improve their essential business outcomes by clarifying and focusing their organizational goals around the customer -- then aligning the priorities, accountability and service delivery model to drive performance, productivity and profits. He does this by equipping leaders with the principles, processes and tools to activate an engaged customer-focused culture that fosters and rewards exceptional performance and productivity.

For additional information please visit online at www.billhogg.ca or email bill@billhogg.ca

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