

6 Survival Tips for Lean Times: Don't Panic, Stay Strong, Nurture Key Customers and Find New Ones

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Small-business owners have one question on their mind these days: How do I survive this recession? This economy is a lot tougher than the one we have enjoyed over the past few years.

Over the last two weeks I have fielded a lot of phone calls from panicked business owners, asking for advice on how to keep going in a recession.

So here are my six tips for making money in this economy:

1. Your attitude determines the dollars. If you give in to panic and think that you won't be able to survive, you are probably right. In this kind of market, your attitude will determine your survival.

What you believe about this market determines what will happen to your business. I have clients that range from sole business owners to multimillion-dollar companies, and they have clearly divided into two camps: those who whine and complain about how awful things are and those who see opportunity and go after it. One client supercharged her prospecting program over the last two weeks and has already landed three new accounts.

Even in a recession, people are still doing business. The opportunities are always there, but you won't see them if you close your eyes and hide away.

2. Do more. Now is not the time to shrink into the background. Get busy doing more marketing and promotion. Sit down and identify opportunities. Take advantage of low-cost online marketing tools like blogging, Facebook and Twitter if they are a good way to reach your target market.

Do a co-promotion with another company to attract new customers. Get out and do more networking, more prospecting. The more people you get in front of, the better chance you have of making sales.

One cleaning service I know is offering their services as part of a buyer's package with a real-estate agent and it's working -- they sold three properties this month.

3. Protect your key customer accounts. Many businesses do not spend enough time thinking about the quality of relationships they have with key customers.

Do you know why they buy from you? Are there things they would like you to improve? Do you thank them for doing business with you? Improving those relationships will make you less vulnerable to poaching from the competition.

Put a plan in place for each of your key customers, focusing on how you can build a stronger partnership. One of my clients, a health product wholesaler, put a distributor sales-rep training program into place and in less than one year on the market, has become a top-selling product.

4. Follow up on every lead. Many small business owners hate selling and they make excuses for not following up on leads when they come in. They treat it as something optional that they do when they have a "spare moment."

They think up all the reasons the sale won't go through before they even follow up. That kind of negative thinking is costing you money and opportunity. Some of my biggest deals came from following up on long shots. I teach all my clients to never assume. You won't know which lead will turn into a sale until you do the follow-up.

5. Prospect! Prospect! Prospect! The more prospects you have in your sales funnel, the more sales you will close. This is a fundamental law of business. To keep sales coming in, you have to keep uncovering new opportunities and new customers on a regular basis.

Successful business owners are always focused on finding new prospects. Sit down and build yourself a list of potential customers that would benefit from buying from you, then start working that list every day. You can't just sit there and hope that they come through your door.

6. Ask for referrals. Lots of people won't ask for referrals because they think they are being pushy or they might hear no. That's ridiculous. Asking for referrals should be an automatic part of your sales process.

Yes, you will hear no sometimes. But many times, if you ask in the right way, you will get great introductions to solid prospects. And that kind of endorsement from happy customers is the best kind of marketing you can have!

Don't be content to listen to the doom and gloom; don't panic. Instead, get serious about your sales and marketing activities. Look for opportunities and act on them.

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