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Planning, preparation matter now more than ever

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The Sacramento economy is no longer in reverse. It's engaged and moving forward at an accelerating pace. Now is the time to escape the pull of a dysfunctional economy and catch the rising tide — an economy driven by cash, not credit; by need, not want; an environment of accountability, not blame.

I understand you've heard it before. Well, you're going to hear it one more time if you keep reading. There are always success stories in times of trouble. It's not often you have an advantage over your competition. Remember your job is to lead. It's time to plan, and time to win.

Start with strategy

Before a business can achieve any degree of meaningful success, it must have a meaningful goal. Ask yourself what you want to achieve in the next three months, next year and three years from now. Identify a goal for each of these time frames and answer the following questions about them:

- Do the goals move our company closer to our long-range desires or are they short-term wins with limited value?
- Are the goals measurable in a way that any two reasonable people could agree on whether they were achieved or not?
- Can we proactively take steps to move us toward achievement of the goals or are they passive?
- Are the goals realistic or wishful thinking? Keep your feet on the ground and make sure you're team is striving for results that don't require luck. We aren't playing craps after all — this is business.
- When will we achieve these goals? Pick a date. Guess if you must, just be realistic.

Put your best thinking into answering these five questions before you do anything else.

Migrate to marketing

Now that you know what you're going to achieve and when, it's time to figure out who needs to know so they can do business with you. This is where the marketing plan comes in.

One of the biggest mistakes any business owner can make is to assume existing customers aren't at risk. Your competitors are at your heels chasing your customers every day. The first audience you need to market to is your existing customers.

These are the customers who know you best, the ones who depend on you. Give them a chance to be informed and celebrate success with you. Make them a part of it. Without customers, you can't survive. Don't just tell them, recruit them.

Finally, get your plan down in writing, NOT in your head! Involve your staff, all of them. That includes technical people, administrative people, facilities and finance. Remember that when you're successful, everyone will be impacted. Give them a chance to be involved and help them prepare while they help you achieve.

Business reborn

It's amazing how many times I've been told that the only time a business plan is important is when you first launch. That's baloney. Don't forget luck is for rabbits.

Take a few hours and write your internal business plan. Lay out your thoughts on why your customers should buy from you and how you will achieve your goals over the next 12 months. Include each of the following sections:

- Executive summary
- Mission, vision and values

- Management/leadership team
- Description of product/services
- Target market
- Industry trends
- Competitor analysis
- Financials

I'm talking about 10 pages, that's all it takes, so don't start whining about how you never have enough time, or that you've got too much paperwork and this will just be one more pile you'll have to deal with — bite the bullet. Either you're willing to do the work success demands or you aren't.

Luck is what happens to those that are prepared for success. That means plan, and I mean now, right now. Before you waste one more minute on something easy just to make you feel productive, do something meaningful. Help the people you are paying good money do their jobs the way you want them done.

If you choose to put this paper down now and move on to something that feels easier, save yourself a lot of anguish and frustration — lock the doors now.

Remember, money comes and goes, but time can never be replaced. Use yours wisely. Plan and prepare for the success you so richly deserve ... and don't forget to take the rest of your company along with you for the ride. Who knows, you might even have some fun along the way.

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