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SIMPLICITY IN WHITEWATER – 2004

by Kenneth B. Lerman

Business Growth and Brand Management Consultant

Large and small companies will continue to restructure in the confusion and whitewater of the new economy. Internally their cultures need (even) more restructuring and sound(er) direction. Externally their marketing, selling and pricing needs restructuring.

Your market environment has changed and will continue to change, further agitating the waters. As captain of your business, will you be trying new, more simple, direct, competitive business strategy? Or will you find shelter and safety by doing it “pretty much the way we’ve always done it”? Will you use the same business models, planning methods and strategy for 2004?

The illustration is simple. For years U.S. business has “lazily” floated downstream. Business was good. The float was made peaceful by an economic expansion fueled by the commercialization and initial penetration of affordable high(er) tech products in the workplace and the home place.

The float was also seductive – charmed by false value promised and artificially delivered – throughout all market segments. I believe it was called virtual reality and seamless. Business was good.

Business believed its own words of quality, service and value and believed in its infinite expansion and grandeur through acquisition versus performance. Business became more like Hollywood, gave themselves awards and trophies for increased volumes while major shareholders had a field day feasting on higher margins by cutting quality, muscle and value. Business was good.

The peaceful float continued with only gentle bends to navigate. The worst mistake business could make was the occasional mis-hire of an experienced young manager who was out of her or his depth.

Roman “bread circuses” returned – they were affordable as public distractions. Celebrity soap opera murder trials, cigars and blue dresses in the Oval office, while greedy CEOs tap danced around the morality of accounting/consulting firms’ crooked recommendations. All this while we continue to endure lackluster NFL seasons filled with more loud hype than player and team performance. Business was good.

The Float is Over

You know the float is over. No more gentle river bends. We are in whitewater, all of us, and no one (including me) knows where the downstream current will take us.

If you’re so smug to think you’re not navigating in whitewater, ask yourself: Are your suppliers? Are your clients? Or any of your employees or their families – younger and older? Are your local and state governments in whitewater? How vibrant is your local economy? Business is not so good any longer.

The immediate 2004 business question remains. Are you going to rearrange the same deck chairs or will you try different, more simple value added business strategies – internally in your culture – externally in your marketing?

My 2004 Recommendation

There is a new frontier appearing. Those who can see it and steer to its profitable opportunities intelligently and simply, will do well. “Those who have ears, let them hear.”

As captain of your business I recommend you be the one steering – not guiding – your ship to higher, safer ground. Here you must fix or change what you know for a certainty is broken. You and your management crew must know how to fix and repair the ship or get someone who does. If you take this course and action, you can then sail back out into deep whitewater and compete more strategically, effectively and aggressively.

One last thought as we leave 2003 and set sail for 2004. Ten years has passed since a virtual Texan with large ears and a larger ego asked, “Do you hear that loud sucking sound? It’s the sound of our jobs leaving the U.S.”

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year –
God bless us every one.

I am, for business –

Ken Lerman

BYLINE: Ken Lerman actively consults with companies on Brand Management and profitable business growth in diverse industries across North America. He presents in-house business development and training programs and public seminars. For additional articles and information, Ken can be contacted at (316) 733-5800 and through his web site at www.kenlerman.com.