How To Survive a Recession

By Tony Jeary

The secret to surviving a recession is opportunity recognition. The first step in opportunity recognition is to know and believe that there will always be opportunity for those who seek and pursue it. Regardless of how bad the economy may seem, people still buy and sell. People still have needs to fill and businesses have products and services that meet those needs. When the economy goes south, however, there is mass fear and concern and the perception is that the entire world may completely cease to function. This is patently untrue. Even in the Great Depression of the 1930's the world continued to function and 75% of Americans had work and jobs. Some people actually became wealthy during the Great Depression because they were able to identify opportunity and capture it.

One of the great examples of success during the Great Depression is the motion picture industry. People were so distressed and fearful about their economic condition they needed emotional relief and a means to escape. The movies provided that relief, no matter how brief and temporary. The movie industry identified need and opportunity and filled it at a price people were able to pay. Opportunity always exists, even though it may be harder to recognize in tough times because it takes a different form.

In good times, opportunity comes in the form of just doing more of what already works. Opportunity in good times assumes the continuation of the normal and capitalizes on things remaining normal. In bad times, opportunity comes by abandoning things that no longer work and finding new things that will work, based on new needs. Recession itself is a great opportunity for those who choose to see it that way. It's just that the opportunities may look different and they might require us to leave our comfort zones. Now we are down to the real stress that a bad economy produces; the stress of change and the need to leave our comfort zones! Sometimes that means taking a new road.

Sometimes taking new roads leads you in a completely different direction than you had originally intended, with favorable consequences. Here's a great example: In 1927, a young married couple started a hot dog and root beer stand called The Hot Shoppe. They had many years of success but they saw greater opportunity along the new highways being built across America. They opened a motor lodge for travelers to sleep overnight. That venture helped J. Willard and Alice Marriott build one of the greatest hotel chains in the United States. In 2007, The Marriott Corporation was handling over 50,000 reservations a day!

If you see something that needs to be done and you have the opportunity to do it, don't let someone else seize the opportunity. Be bold and step up to the task. If you are the *first*

person to see that something needs to be done, you are probably the *best person* to do it. That is the action you need to take when you identify opportunity. But, what is it that helps us recognize new opportunities?

The people who have trouble recognizing opportunity are most likely the same people who are unwilling to leave their comfort zones. What is a comfort zone? First and foremost it is a mental state in which people lose the momentum to pursue a vision because they have accepted where they are as the best they need to be or do. Identifying and capturing new opportunities always requires strategic change and the nature of strategic change always disrupts comfort zones. That is why change is a big deal to people and is so difficult to achieve. The pain that accompanies change can be financial, physical, or emotional, but regardless of the type of discomfort created by change, recession and hard economic times demand that you embrace it if you intend to remain competitive and effective.

Comfort zones are called *comfort zones* because they are *comfortable!* The only thing required to remain in a comfort zone is to close yourself off to new ideas and refuse to change. Over the years, I've learned that nothing very interesting or innovative ever emerges from a comfort zone, except more plans to make the comfortable *more c*omfortable. Comfort zones impact all of us. When people in organizations
become too comfortable, it's because they have lost the momentum to pursue their vision. Why? Because they've accepted where they are as the best they need to be or do. Recession and hard times require a different response.

So, how do you survive a recession? First, you embrace a mindset that relentlessly pursues new opportunity. Don't close yourself off to new ideas and change and become an expert on what people need and want. In a recession, people may want some things that are different and someone will have to fill those needs. Second, read lots of books, magazines and other publications that may expose new needs your product or service might be able to meet. You will probably discover that people still want your product or service, but just need to see it differently.

This brings us to the final piece of the puzzle on surviving a recession. You must be able to articulate a powerful value proposition for your product or service that will resonate with the felt needs of your customers and potential customers. Understanding their deepest felt needs is the key to understanding the value of what you have to offer. Talk to your customers and prospects. Discover their problems and concerns and you will discover your opportunities!