



November 8, 2007

## A Better Tomorrow

Staff Writers

*Lessons we learn today will help us tomorrow.*

### My QP

columns run every other month, so this is the last you'll hear from me in 2007, which is turning out to be a fine year. Oh sure, turmoil in Iraq hangs over our heads, prices at grocery store keep rising despite experts telling us inflation is under control, and campaign rhetoric is in full swing, even with the presidential election a year away. But I'm a "glass half full" kind of guy. The printing clients I coach and the ones I met at recent conferences are overcoming these global challenges, and appear on track for solid year-end financial results.

Closer to home—actually, within my own house—we're approaching a momentous occasion. Our little girl, who it seems just yesterday I held in my arms at 2:00 a.m. and gently sang back to sleep, celebrates her 18th birthday next month. Anyone reading this who has walked in these footsteps understands the pride that milestone brings. If you haven't been down this road, trust me, it's one of those life passages that affects you on many levels.

We are blessed to have a good child who excels at many things. She's first chair clarinet in the school band, has a nice role in their theatre group's upcoming production of "*Les Misérables*," and ranks 11th in her senior class of 625. (Of course, as with many teenagers, there are moments of emotional ranting that make us wonder if she was switched with an alien at birth, but in the spirit of the season, I'm overlooking those.) Her scholastic talents provide many college options and, based on the number of letters, brochures, and marketing materials she's receiving, we're doing our part to raise the composite output of printers across the nation.

Actually, this entire college selection process is amazing. Thirty years ago, when it was time for me to decide, my father said, "You can go to Texas or go to work." Decision made. I showed up one Saturday morning, pencil in hand for the SAT, scored above 1,000, and went back to enjoying my senior year.

Today, there are prep courses to take, AP subject tests to pass, college nights to attend, campus visits to explore, reference letters to seek, essays to write, and applications to complete. It's a complex, competitive environment and the pressures are high. One institution on the West Coast—famous for dropouts who become Silicon Valley legends—said it accepted fewer than one in 10 of 20,000 applications received; declining valedictorians and perfect entrance exams.

### Lessons From Academia

While much of me longs for simpler days—and a return to letting kids be kids—I'm convinced the rigors of academic pursuit predict bright futures for small business owners like you. As a rising tide lifts all ships, the increased expectations on our youth elevate all skill levels, from doctoral candidates to high school equivalents.

Of course, the iPod generation talent pool is still years away. (Someone at retirement age told me recently he found the perfect person for succession—his 10-year-old grandson.) In the meantime, your task is to enhance the performance of the employees working for you. One way is to take an academic approach to achieving excellence. Implement this plan for 2008 and your achievement scores will soar:

### Inspire Greatness:

Who is the teacher you remember most from high school? Why did that person come to mind? It's likely because he/she saw inside you a talent others missed. For me, it was Sister Joan Markey, who encouraged a raw writer to pursue journalism. Yes,

she bludgeoned all my theme papers with red ink, but she also praised my creative style. Can there be any greater joy in business ownership than having that sort of affect on someone? You have that opportunity with everyone who works for you.

#### **Serve as Counselor:**

Meet individually with each of your employees and discuss their dreams and needs. Help them visualize the future path they desire, and show them how to create the plan for achieving it. Then regularly circle back to see where they're stalling and how you can help push away roadblocks.

#### **Eliminate "Senior-itis":**

It's natural to become complacent, especially after years of doing the same thing. Think about what that must feel like for your longtime employees. Commit to helping all your team members engage anew on a daily basis. Consider cross training, continuing education, or outside activities to add new energy to their daily grind. Never forget how personal happiness aids professional results.

#### **The Next Step**

There was one other transition in 2007 worth noting. This was the year our 12-year-old son took over from Dad the responsibility of mowing the lawn. In Houston, the only two months our lawnmower sits idle are January and February, so this is no small commitment. And having someone help with the yard for the first time in 17 years of homeownership was great. He eagerly accepted the role each week without complaint or excuse, taking pride in showing me the straight lines and occasionally cross-mowing to get that "baseball field" effect. Best of all, amidst the heat and humidity, he asked if I thought he could earn money next summer by mowing neighbors' yards. Ah, a budding entrepreneur! That might make the angst of his impending teenage years less disruptive within the walls of our home.

#### **Addendum:** My fellow *QP*

columnist John Stewart wrote recently about the value of focus groups. I co-facilitate one that's achieved nice results the past two years by focusing on education—meeting quarterly in person and twice monthly by webinar. If you own a printing location that does \$1-2 million annually, have an outside sales presence, and would like to take your business to the next level, send me an email at the address below. I'll forward it to your peer who organized this learning group and now seeks members for a second one to begin in the first quarter of 2008.

*David Handler is the founder of Success Handler, LLC, and previously served as a senior executive at ICED. Since 2003, he's led clients in the quick printing industry to explore their professional and personal dreams. David's third child is a nine-year-old daughter whose natural abilities are beginning to blossom. To start grooming the talent on your team, send an email to [coach@successhandler.com](mailto:coach@successhandler.com) or visit [www.successhandler.com](http://www.successhandler.com).*

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