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Glimmer of Hope

Staff Writers

Business planning using SWOT Analysis and best practices improves performance

Editor's Note: This is David Handler's final Coaching column for Quick Printing. His own "Success Plan" is guiding him to other, larger markets. We'd like to thank David for all the wonderful stories and advice he has shared with QP's readers-and staff-in the years he has spent with us. We will miss him, but wish him well in all his endeavors.

When I worked at ICED, a peer gave me one of those beautiful Betta fish that live alone in their own isolated water world. She had housed it in a large vase that had a living plant flowing over the sides, and even selected blue marbles for the bottom of this decorative arrangement to perfectly match the color of the fish. It became quite a conversation piece for all who visited my office, and while these freshwater works of art typically live less than three years, "Mr. Fish" made it to the ripe old age of six.

Fast forward to last year: Our good friends relocated to Boise...and left behind their Betta for our 11-year-old who dutifully fed 'Glimmer' three times a week. Recently, it was time to clean his living space, so my daughter and I went outside, gently transferred the fragile fish to a plastic cup and scrubbed his bowl spotless. After waiting a few minutes for the faucet water to warm up, we poured him back into his comfortable confines and returned the bowl to its spot on the counter in our kitchen.

About 15 minutes later, I glanced over and quickly surmised the fish was: 1) not moving, and 2) listing perpendicularly at the waterline. A half hour later, I whispered in my wife's ear, "I think it's dead." That evening I called my daughter over to see him and delivered the bad news. She looked at her inherited pet floating in place and said, "It's okay. You can bury him tomorrow,"-which is what I intended to do (although "bury" wasn't exactly how I envisioned it).

After our daughter left for school that next morning, I went over to the bowl, said a few words to my wife in remembrance, and prepared to send Glimmer to his final resting place. "Did you see that?" "No," she replied. "He just moved." Sure enough, the recently departed family member was slowly regaining its swimming stroke. When the 11-year-old returned home hours later, I took her over to the bowl and said, "He lives." And as of this writing we're still raising a resurrected fish that appears ready to provide more years of loyal companionship...as best a Betta can anyway.

Success Plan

This adventure brought to mind all of the quick printers who have spent the last year or two with your business on life support-hoping you can keep it alive long enough for resuscitation to occur-and fully committed to the belief that one day you'll experience again the joy of floating merrily in the rising tide of economic recovery. No one knows, of course, what date that will occur. However, you're a survivor...which means you intend to keep heading upstream, and that requires having a firm plan in place to guide you to clear waters.

Through my work with coaching clients, I created a "Success Plan" to guide printing center owners through the process of

defining how they intend to grow. This is not a lengthy workbook that takes weeks to develop-then gets stuck in a drawer and forgotten. It's a simple exercise that requires about two hours of thinking time on essential pieces of your operations.

What you end up with is a one-page business plan to share with your team, then place front-and-center on your desk as a daily reminder of your desired priorities. I've guided nearly 30 printers through the process the past three years, and each one remarked something to the tune of, "That was worth the effort."

Note: If you would like a copy of this document, please send an email to coach@successhandler.com [coach@successhandler.com] and put "Success Plan" in the subject line.

Here are the three main sections of Success Plan 2010:

The core of your business

As Jim Collins pointed out in the legendary business books "Built to Last" and "Good to Great," companies that survive and thrive understand their Core Values and Core Purpose, and everyone in the organization focuses on living them while pursuing a clearly defined Vision. A Success Plan that's built to make you great starts by laying a foundation that acknowledges what these are for your business.

What you do well...or not

The term SWOT Analysis originated nearly 40 years ago...and it's still a solid exercise for every planning endeavor. Bringing your team together to identify Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats is imperative to gain clarity on what paths you want to pursue. Failing to include this step-or doing it without input from others-puts you at risk of missing the next big wave of growth.

The most important things

There is an oft-told story about a professor who places some big stones in a mayonnaise jar and asks his class, "Is it full?" When they answer yes, he adds smaller stones and asks again. As his students still miss the right answer, he continues with sand and water before sealing the jar. Then he says, "These are what you face every day in business. The lesson is to focus on the big rocks, and not let the little things get in your way." Thus, the final piece of a Success Plan is to identify your Rocks...those four or five major initiatives you wish to implement in 2010.

In researching Siamese Fighting Fish prior to writing this column, I learned something interesting. Bettas have a unique labyrinth organ on their head that allows them to breathe oxygen directly from the surface...in addition to that which they take in through gills. Thus, Glimmer was likely in respiratory shock after our cleaning episode, and stayed at the top of his bowl all those minutes to gasp for oxygen. That's not unlike this year for many printers. You've struggled to catch your breath while trying to ensure your survival. To position 2010 for the best start, commit right now to coming up for air-and make time to create your Success Plan.

David Handler is the founder of Success Handler, LLC; an executive coaching firm that helps clients explore possibilities for achieving what they desire. With guidance from his spouse and business partner Kathy, he recently completed the 2010 Success Plan for their company. For help developing yours, text 713/560-5601, tweet @davidhandler [tweet @davidhandler], email coach@successhandler.com [coach@successhandler.com], read blog.successhandler.com, or visit www.successhandler.com.



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