

Downturn Marketing: Go to the Ant!

By Kelly Walker, M.S.

Go to the ant...consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.

Solomon: Proverbs

"To work today is to eat tomorrow. It is best to prepare for the days of necessity." Aesop: The Ant and the Grasshopper

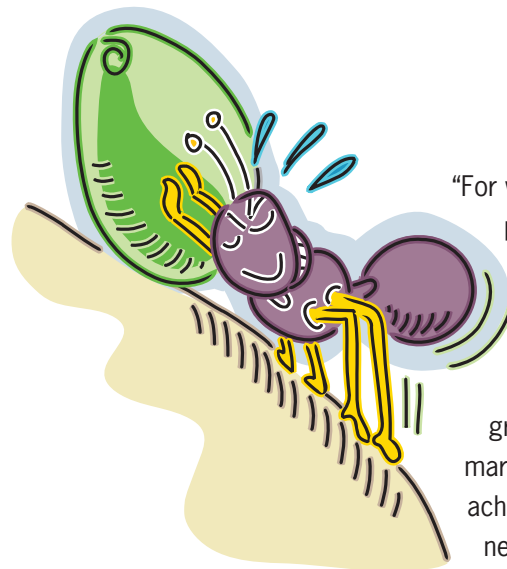
Are you an ant, or a grasshopper?

We all know the story of the industrious ant, working diligently to prepare for the winter while the grasshopper fiddled away. Not that the grasshopper didn't have his strengths. He knew how to jump on an opportunity and enjoyed the good times. The ant, however, knew that the summer wouldn't go on forever. He prepared. But what if you haven't prepared and your business is feeling the chill of a downturn? What can you do to become more like the ant, as the "perfect economic storm" approaches? Is it already too late to adapt?

Right now the economy is cooling down and may even be heading into icy recession. The word on the street isn't good. Businesses all around you are reporting lower revenue, fewer customers, lost sales. Many are struggling; some are in the process of failing completely. "Cut expenses," you hear on TV, radio and at business seminars. Sound advice? Cut away at unnecessary spending, but if you want to become wise like the ant, if you want to overwinter...

Don't you dare cut your marketing budget!

Marketing is the means by which you gain brand awareness, consumer interest, and eventually sales and revenue. Stop feeding the marketing machine and you may well starve the entire business. Marketing is not something you want to cut to save a few bucks, any more than a farmer would want to make a meal of the seeds he will need to grow his future.



"For well-positioned companies, an economic recession should not prompt marketing cutbacks, but rather an aggressive increase in marketing spending to achieve superior business performance," according to research

authored by Gary Lilien and Arvind Rangaswamy of Penn State's Smeal College of Business: *Turning Adversity Into Advantage: Does Proactive Marketing During a Recession Pay Off?*

This study found that forward-thinking companies see economic downturns as opportunities to strengthen their competitive advantage. Indeed, they don't just say "we will survive," they operate with the determination that "we will prevail!"

"Athletes often choose times of stress to mount attacks: strong runners and bicycle racers may increase their pace on hills or under other challenging conditions," the authors write. "In a similar vein, proactive marketing includes both the sensing of the existence of the opportunity (a tough hill and fatigued opponents) and an aggressive response (possessing the necessary strength or nerve) to the opportunity."

Key to this concept, however is, like the ant, collecting the reserves to go the distance. Companies that didn't emphasize strategic marketing and brand management in the good times are going to have a harder time picking up the pace in the down times. Indeed, businesses that let their marketing efforts slide when the world is beating a path to their door, may be sent packing when the doorbell stops ringing. The grasshopper had it great until there was less green to go around.

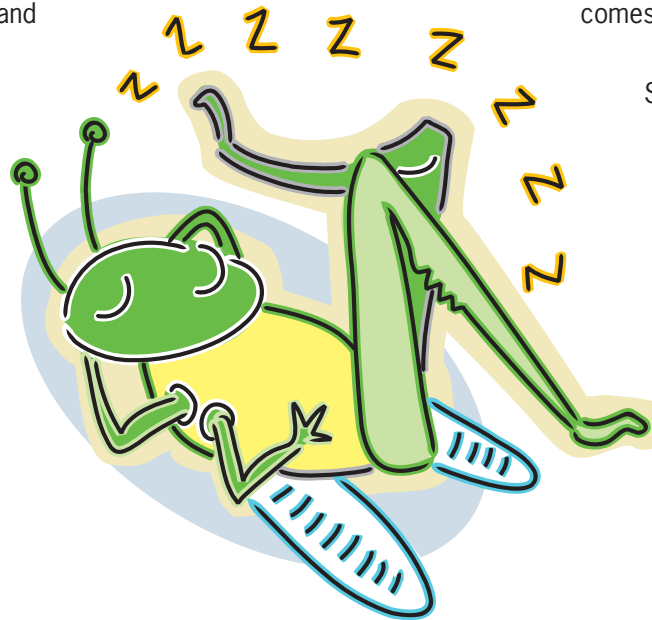
"Those firms with a strategic emphasis on marketing have already put in place the programs that help them derive value from their marketing activities (e.g., well-recognized brands, differentiated products, targeted communications, good support and service, etc.)," the authors add.

If you are one of "those firms," you're an ant. You are in a good position to surge ahead and position yourself at the front of the pack. You have the reserves to kick your marketing into high gear and you know now is the time. However, if you're feeling left out in the cold, hope is not lost. Here, grasshopper, is how you can consider the ways of the ant and be wise.

First of all, though right now you may be wondering just how to survive, you must believe that you will prevail, no matter what or how long it takes! "The spirit that stays undefeated in spite of everything," said Harry Emerson Fosdick, "is part of the solution." Stop jumping around, be

still and face your challenges head-on. Take a good, honest look at the reality of your situation, no matter how gloomy it may seem at the moment, then roll up your sleeves and start working on solutions. Seasons change, the economy will get better, but there is great long-term value to be gained from the lessons to be learned now.

Second, remember how I said, "Don't you dare cut your marketing budget!"? Your overall marketing budget consists of cash + time + creativity, so extra time and creativity can make up for a decrease in available funds. Now is the time to think differently and be resourceful. Don't throw your money at guesswork advertising, hoping for a silver bullet (a very grasshopper thing to do). Find a marketing "ant," a professional with a wealth of creative ideas and sound strategy, to take you in and help you weather the storm. Hire at least a little time to seek guidance and ask what footwork YOU can do to keep things on budget. With a little money invested in guidance and creative strategy, and with your sweat equity, you can not only survive—you can take your first steps toward becoming the kind of business that will thrive when the next economic winter comes, somewhere down the road.



So hop to it! Keep fighting, hang in there, grasshopper, and when times get good again, you'll have learned a valuable lesson. With resolve, creativity and guidance, you will start the path to a stronger business, and your courage will help restore the confidence we all need to bring back the sun. ●