

**SMALL BUSINESS**

## **Weathering the storm**

*Marketing efforts, customer service take on added importance as companies attempt to emerge from rough patch unscathed*

By **DAVID PRIZINSKY**

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Small business owners and managers are going the extra mile to boost sales and stay viable in a tough economy.

There is no silver bullet, but companies here are increasing marketing efforts and are paying closer attention to customer service in response to current business conditions.

Northeast Ohio companies in such disparate industries as pet care, the manufacturing of steel socket screws and the distribution of check processing machinery share a focus on customer service.

"In the current economy only the best will survive," said Jeff Grano, co-owner of Going to the Dogs Inc. in Fairview Park. "I met with the staff six months ago and everyone knows only the best employees will stay."

Mr. Grano hasn't been cowed by the downturn and even expanded his dog grooming business in March with a new salon in North Ridgeville. He is increasing his advertising and direct mail operations. He also is reaching out to his customers with phone calls reminding them that it might be time to give Fido a bath.

"I have big-company competitors and I have to do a better job" than them, said Mr. Grano, who noted that his staff of 10 employees has been trained to understand the importance of customer service. The payoff is that he has cultivated a list of 7,000 customers after 10 years in the business.

Successful efforts by Mr. Grano and other small business owners are critical to the local and state economies. About half the private-sector labor force in Ohio works in companies with fewer than 500 employees and about 35% work at firms with fewer than 100 employees, according to the U.S. Small Business Administration.

### **At your service**

In times like these, where pressures on business come from both suppliers and customers, on-time delivery and service are critical, said Charlie Kerr, president of Kerr Lakeside Inc., a Euclid manufacturer of steel socket screws.

"Service, or the lack thereof, can go a long way to keeping or losing a customer," Mr. Kerr said. "I push the panic button when we are in danger of shipping a job late."

Mr. Kerr said his 78-employee company is receiving many requests for price quotes on jobs. "I assume our customers are also letting other people look at the jobs we are running, and not delivering on time opens the door almost every time," he said.

Kerr Lakeside also is coping with the rapidly rising price of the alloy steel the company uses to produce its products. Mr. Kerr said a little help is coming from the declining value of the dollar, which is raising the price of imports and making it easier to export.

Mr. Kerr said sales this year will exceed sales last year.

### **Circle 'round the customer**

Sensing a difficult economy, F&E Check Protector Co. in Northfield 18 months ago became more aggressive in its marketing efforts.

"We stressed going to trade shows held by our customers and increasing our direct mailing," said Kim Young, account consultant for F&E, which specializes in equipment used to process financial transactions.

"You can't stand pat or you might not be around," said Ms. Young, noting sales will be up 20% in 2008.

Ms. Young said her company is working closely with customers on developing equipment options that can better solve customers' problems and save them money.

This collaborative approach is recommended by Richard Walton, a volunteer counselor with the Cleveland office of the Service Corps of Retired Executives, which provides advice to small businesses.

"Try to formulate a special plan for your customers," said Mr. Walton, who spent more than 50 years in the industrial coatings business. "Let them know you're working with them. Don't reduce those sales calls now because you are building relationships."

Management consultant Robert Dobrowski, a partner at the Cleveland accounting and consulting firm of Plante & Moran, PLLC, likewise said staying close to the customer is critical now.

"You have to circle the wagons in tough times and have a customer-driven approach," he advised.

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