



SHOPTALK

By Margie Johnson



COMPETING IN THE “SEA OF CHANGE”

Shop Talk is a continuing series of consumer-oriented retail articles by Margie Johnson, president of Shop Talk, a retail consulting firm that specializes in showing organizations how to become leaders in their marketplaces and industries through customer-centered training. Over the past 15 years, Margie has worked in many Main Street towns throughout the nation. She is passionate about helping small business owners succeed.

In 2010, it is imperative that business owners carefully re-examine all of their business strategies. In this “sea of change,” coupled with prevailing strong economic headwinds, the forecast looms uncertain with market changes, technology changes, sales and marketing changes, and necessary operational changes, among others.

Management must find ways to adapt and embrace these changes.

While consulting with a broad cross-section of independent business owners, I found it essential to urge them to reflect on their ability to embrace change. Too often, I see business owners who become overly complacent, happily believing they have figured everything out or, even worse, just waiting for things to get better. This wishful thinking strategy has no place in today’s fast-paced, ever-evolving marketplace. *Change will remain a constant.* Business owners must focus on how they can thrive in this environment. They need to determine the types of changes that threaten their business identity. *Differentiate or die* is a mantra that must remain a constant survival ideology. Businesses have to adapt and evolve, or they will disappear over time!

Outlined in this article is a 12-point approach that I frequently use with my clients. It is focused on asking key questions about the direction of the business.

Storeowners can use this “Where We’ve Been and Where We’re Going” exercise as a simple framework for tweaking their business model. This recap incorporates a quick glimpse back and a serious, thoughtful strategic exercise for positioning a business in 2010.

Where We’ve Been and Where We’re Going

1 2009 would be rated as a *poor* __, *fair* __, *good* __, or *excellent* __ year. Your sales were *up* ___%, or *down* ___% from 2008. Your profitability was *up* ___%, or *down* ___% from 2008.

2 The single *thing* that most *positively* affected your business in the last 12 months was _____.

3 What was the *worst* thing that *happened* to the business in the last 12 months?

4 What four goals have been set (or should have been set) to make this year better for your business? (*Be specific.*)

5 List three of the biggest challenges or threats to your business that you foresee in the near future.

6 How do you plan to better position your business with enhanced marketing initiatives?

7 Who do you consider your top two competitors? What are those two competitors doing that will potentially affect your business?

8 What new trends or strengths do you plan to use to enhance your business in 2010? (*Be specific.*)





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Find out how your Main Street business owners are working to enhance their employees' skills and using customer feedback to meet consumers' changing needs and lifestyles.

- 9 How are you using customer feedback to help grow your business, i.e., focus groups, advisory boards, mystery shoppers, etc.?
- 10 What adjustments will you make to better tailor your products to meet your customers' changing needs and lifestyles?
- 11 What can you do to enhance your own skills and those of your team to help grow your business?
- 12 What is the *most critical thing* you need to implement in your business in 2010?

As you reflect on your answers to these 12 questions, remember, “change takes time.” Many of us fear it. Yet we know it is essential. Too many of us want change to happen overnight. Change is a process – not an immediate outcome. To succeed in making the necessary changes, business owners will go through stages of contemplation, reframing, commitment, trial and error, and recommitment.

Margieism – The only place where “success” comes before “work” is in the dictionary.

As merchants formulate their 2010 business strategies, I would highly recommend they read *Over Promise and Over Deliver* by Rick Barrera. The author cites case after case demonstrating unusually rapid successes in creating and sustaining a successful business. *Over Promise and Over Deliver* offers a premise based on the alignment of three critical “touch points” – (1) product touch points, (2) systems touch points, and (3) human touch points.

Barrera details how extremely successful companies have learned to over deliver on their brand promise. This is a quick and powerful “read” that I feel underscores key issues that must be addressed to stay relevant in today’s fiercely competitive business environment.

Hard times provide opportunities for innovative businesses to achieve amazing success. At the end of the day, successful independent business owners demonstrate the ability to multi-task, juggle priorities, and be pulled in many directions. These entrepreneurs have mastered the art of “focus” – focusing on what is most important to their clients. Companies that continually focus on the customer expectation and experience, be it through product, service, or atmosphere, are always the survivors/winners.

I challenge each business owner reading this article to spend time applying my “Where We’ve Been and Where We’re Going” approach to 2010. Get your partners, staff, and clients engaged in this process. Use these results as your roadmap to success. As you revisit and revise your “business intentions,” continue to re-enforce the “value of one” – one inquiry, one sale, one customer, one client, one advocate. Turn “one-timers” into “life-timers.”

I welcome your feedback as you apply these processes to compete in a “sea of change,” and I wish you a great 2010!

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