



## Sail On, Sailor. What new and exciting course will you chart?

HAVE YOU NOTICED the unprecedented amount of economic adversity and uncertainty of late? And I'm not simply pointing to the "Out of Business" signs hanging from your local salon or coffee shop, which come and go during good times and bad. I'm referring to the perfect storm of influences that has capsized well-known brands and has us questioning the viability of marketplace giants. Business prognosticators single out the economic cold front as the primary cause. Don't believe it.

This raging tempest has been brewing since the turn of the century and it, paradoxically, is the result of how *good* we've had it, not how *bad* things appear. Over the past twenty years, consumers have spent themselves silly on purchases of bigger homes, newer vehicles, entertainment extravaganzas, and every electronic gadget and gizmo known to modern man. And that steadily increasing level of consumption has raised their standard of living, along with those of fellow consumers (especially in emerging economies).

The increasing tide of spending has also enticed way too many businesses to launch way too many ho-hum products and services into a sea already teeming with uninspiring options. And this has created a harrowing and potentially dangerous environment. I say potentially because if you're a skilled sailor, you may be able to harness the force of the waves and wind to propel yourself forward and avoid the storm altogether.

Instead, what do most businesses do? They panic. They throw people overboard, batten down the hatches and try to ride it out. The problem with that course of action during this particular storm is that there's a mass of boats flailing around you. There's far more danger in doing nothing than there is in pulling everyone up on deck and making some bold, strategic moves. Yes, your boat should get a once-over by you and your crew (and your accountant). But then, take the wheel and get the hell out of there . . . and pronto! Here's a simple checklist to help guide you:

*Gather information*—Information is your single most important resource in a storm. Get a clear description and keen understanding of the behavior of your audience. Not their attitudes. Not their satisfaction levels. Their changing marketplace routines. What are they doing right now? What do their choices tell you about how they're feeling and what they desire?

*Prepare the crew*—Going into a storm the crew should have all of the available information. Educate each crew member on what constitutes "value" in today's tumultuous marketplace until they feel it in their bones. Empower, reward and inspire them to modify their stations to create and deliver unique and compelling value to customers and prospects with each and every action taken and dollar spent, day in and day out.

*Make course adjustments*—Do your best to avoid the storm, or its worse parts, by reaching out directly to your audience with new and valuable products, services and experiences; ones that will make a difference to them as they try to navigate their own personal storms. Stop marketing *to* and *at* people (it's like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic), and start doing *for* and *with* them. Throw them life jackets or reach out a caring hand. Be a tug boat and tow them to a happier place.

*Get ready for a battle with Mother Nature*—Prepare your people with the safety of knowing that they're surrounded by strong leadership and the best map and crew available. Avoid future storms by building long-term thinking into your organization—thinking that embraces the idea that we're living in a much more demanding marketplace; one that requires empathy for the customer, collaborative innovation, and a passion for learning, experimentation, and change.

Abraham Lincoln wrote, "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." The waters are rough and you have the wheel. What new and exciting course will you chart? Sail on, sailor.