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Ten tips to help you get your business in shape next year

With 2010 nearly upon us, it's time to think about getting in shape for a new year. No, this isn't about your waistline, but rather about your business' bottom line.

For many industries, the past 18 months have been anything but kind. If you're lucky, your company is still relatively fit — it may just need to tone up a bit. Other companies, however, are far from peak condition — they could even be considered unhealthy.

As smart business owners, you know what you need to do to keep your companies in shape, but like so many of us, even you need reminders to motivate you occasionally. The following 10 tips are just that. Simple reminders of what you need to do to get your business in tip-top shape and ensure your company is strong enough to bear the weight of whatever lies ahead in 2010.

- **Refocus on fundamentals:** Before the current economic downturn, many business owners were focused externally in an effort to identify growth and expansion opportunities. Now, you may want to refocus internally. Examine the core functions of your business operations to be sure the fundamentals are sound and the infrastructure is strong.

- **Repair what's broken:** If some aspect of your business isn't working as it should, now may be the opportune time to fix it. When business is booming, managers are often too busy to focus on and repair functions that aren't as efficient or effective as they should be. Take time now to examine your processes, procedures and even people, and make changes or improvements where necessary.

- **Reevaluate your business strategy:** The one luxury a slowdown offers is time. Make the most of the slower pace by reevaluating your business strategy. Consider your products and service offerings. Have you expanded into areas outside of your wheelhouse or

beyond your core? If so, take a hard look at what is working and what isn't.

- **Retrench if necessary:** Just as a few extra pounds can make you feel uncomfortable and out of shape, growing beyond a level your company can comfortably maintain can cause it to feel unfit as well. And any fitness expert will tell you that it is easier to lose five pounds before those five pounds can double into 10. In the same way, it is better to recognize potential issues and retrench now, if necessary, than wait and let an added burden take a toll on your business' long-term health.

- **Reduce waste:** Reducing your waistline is one way to shape up, but may we also suggest reducing your "waste line." Look around your company. Where is money being spent unnecessarily? Where can you reduce costs? Perhaps you could cut back on business travel, holiday celebrations or client gifts. Your employees and clients will understand. In fact, now is a time when frugality is both expected and respected.

- **Reinvest in your business:** While you're looking for ways to cut costs, you should also be looking for ways to reinvest in your business — especially its infrastructure.

Just as businesses need to spend money to make money, sometimes you need to spend money to save money. Investing in advanced technology or more automated office processes may save your company more money over time.

- **Re-engage your employees:** Most would agree that it is not an especially great time to own a business, but it is not an easy time to work for one either. Of course, it beats the alternative, but your employees are genuinely nervous about their jobs and their personal financial security. Such distractions can lead to reduced productivity and poor performance. Do what you can to help your employees remain engaged and productive. Communicate openly, honestly and often, and to the extent possible, offer opportunities for professional development, whether that is a training opportunity, a mentoring program or a challenging new project.

- **Reward top performers:** Now is not the time to neglect your employees, especially your top performers. Don't mistakenly assume that your best talent will stay with you because there is nowhere for them to go. Good employees can always find work, even in a bad economy. Reward your key people to motivate them and to demonstrate to them that you value their contributions to the organization. And remember, rewards do not have to be solely monetary. A promotion, with new responsibilities and a new job title, can often serve to recognize an employee's effort and hard work.

- **Revisit abandoned strategies:** This period of slow economic activity need not be entirely about retrenching and rightsizing. Now may be an opportune time to revisit past strategies or initiatives. What opportunities did you walk away from in the past? Was there an initiative that made sense, but you didn't have the resources to pursue at the time? Perhaps now you have the time and people to further investigate and implement that forgotten strategy.

- **Reinvent yourself:** This isn't for the mild-mannered or meek-hearted. It is a bold move that takes some nerve — it also requires extensive forethought and planning. But if what you are doing now isn't working, doing something extreme may be what it is going to take to succeed. Maybe your core business is drying up or becoming antiquated. What new avenues are open to you? Is there an ancillary product or service that should become more core to your offering?

Just like getting your body in shape takes willpower and resolve, getting your company in shape takes discipline and determination. The process, however, can be energizing and exciting, and the results can ensure your company's strength and long-term health. Get moving and good luck! ■

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