

# An Iron-Clad, Titanium-Clad Rule for Getting Business in a Recession: *Improve your Salespeople*

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By Jeffrey Fox

Despite the pressures and gloom that come with an economic downturn, recessions also present unique opportunities to the growth-minded manager. One area that short-sighted managers find easy to cut is employee training, especially sales training. However, cutting sales effectiveness training is exactly the wrong thing to do for business-to-business organizations. To cut sales training is to cut the connection between the company and the customer, just when that connection is most vulnerable.

During the 2001 recession, a Fortune Magazine essay stated,

*[One fundamental]... that must be non-negotiable—is to focus on the quality of your people. We hope it's no longer necessary to argue that this is increasingly your company's only source of competitive advantage. Yet when times get tough, many companies ease up on recruiting, figuring a slow economy will drive more applicants their way, and they spend less on training as a way to raise profits quickly without doing immediate damage to the business.*

*That's just dumb.*

*People do become obsolete; they also grow. To put it in old-economy terms, can you imagine postponing maintenance on an aircraft for six months? You wouldn't consider it, yet you may be tempted to do something even worse. Successful companies avoid this mistake. The most valuable airline in the world, Southwest, is one of America's most desirable employers and in 1999 received 170,000 applications for just 6,000 positions. Yet the company recruits vigorously and never lets up, nor does it get stingy on training. The story is similar at General Electric and McKinsey— getting the best people and making them better is in the DNA of the most successful companies.*

Business-to-business marketers should cut tradeshow spending, unless they are introducing a new product or customers are able to purchase products at the show (customers are probably cutting back on attendance anyway). Many, if not most, marketers can cut advertising, because their messages are rarely well-tested

and the ad creative is often off-strategy. But business-to-business companies cannot cut the training of their front line troops, the salesforce.

Cutting selling skills training is akin to baseball or football teams cutting spring training or daily practice. Cutting salesforce training is no different than cutting surgeon's training, entertainers' rehearsals, or airplane pilot simulations. Does anyone think Bruce Springsteen winged his fantastic 12-minute Super Bowl performance? Is not everyone connected to US Airways flight 1549 grateful that Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger had been through thousands of training hours as a glider pilot and commercial jet pilot?

Who would we rather have standing on the wall: soldiers superbly trained on their sophisticated weaponry, or guys whose commander saved money by cutting weapons training?

Arm your salesforce. Invest in your rainmakers and up-and-coming rainmakers. Find and shape new rainmakers. In the book, "The Secrets of Great Rainmakers," there is a chapter titled "Rainmakers Love Recessions.\*" Give your rainmakers the means to flourish in this tough marketplace. Give your rainmakers the best tools. Train them to dollarize the values of your products and services, to sell money not features, especially when your customers are behaving more frugally than ever. Teach them to pre-call plan, to do indepth needs analysis, and to ask customers for commitments that lead to orders. Every share point your salesperson gains today will help your company survive. Every share point your salesforce gains today will be worth much more when markets rebound.

Unless all your products and services enjoy 100% market share, there is business to get. If last year your salesforce had 2 days of training, this year give them 4 or 6 days. Rainmakers will bring business. Good, proven value selling sales training, combined with involvement from top management, and true pay-for-performance rings the cash register even in tough times.

To para-quote Fortune magazine, *"To cut sales training is just dumb... and the great companies never do it."*

*\* For a copy of the text of the "Rainmakers Love Recessions", please contact Fox & Co. at [rainmaker@foxandcompany.com](mailto:rainmaker@foxandcompany.com).*

*Fox & Co. also has available a 25-page playbook of actions to take during a downturn, which is part of a one-day "Recession Strategy Workshop" offered to clients.*