Thanks to a lousy economy and not knowing what was going to hit us next, instead of leading and being strong, we went into survivor mode. That has cost us a lot of money. As a result, we're not having as much fun as we used to, running our business. What suggestions do you have for helping us get back on track?

The driving force behind every privately held business is the owner. In tough times business owners end up isolated, trying to work out complex problems on their own. It's been a touch and go economy, with 2 steps forward, 1 back. The stress that goes with uncertainty can wear down the strongest of business owners.

Unfortunately, as business owners get stressed and distracted, playing more defense than offense, the business slows down, opportunities are missed. Getting back on track takes razor sharp focus, a clear plan of action, and deliberate marshalling of resources.

This owner would do well to remember that in every economic cycle, there are winners and losers. Not everyone fails, not everyone survives. Choices, plans and perseverance make the difference. Owners who take deliberate, well-thought-out risks, and who use a written, regularly updated plan, are more likely to survive.

Most owners, if asked, say that a plan would be useful. But there's no time, and no one to help them build one. Don't believe it.

Set aside time each week to work on the business. Figure out how the business will grow it's way out of it's troubles. Answer some basic questions:

- who are our best customers, and what do they want next from us
- what are our best profit products or services, and who else might buy them
- how much more could we make if we let go of our least profitable clients and replaced them with better quality customers
- what would be the benefit if we stopped supplying low margin products or services and put all our effort into our best ones
- how much more profit do we need each month in order to put money away into reserves
- where can I get a budget and forecast, so I can see what's happening more clearly
- which jobs have to change, as we move forward
- since we can't do everything at once, what are the top 5 things we need to get done right away, 5 things mid-term, 5 things long term, to help the business make progress
The company's success means a lot to everyone around you, and most are motivated to help. Employees keep their jobs. Vendors keep your account. Customers continue to rely on a valuable supplier. Advisors add you to their list of success stories. Family members get to share in the profits and benefits of a more relaxed owner. Friends get to see you succeed and enjoy your company. Get them all involved in helping you move the business forward.

Here are suggestions for marshalling support, so you don't have to do it all yourself:

- ask who can help you get more prospects; include easier-to-sell referrals
- brainstorm ways to self-finance growth, and prioritize next steps to build up cash flow
- ask everyone to come up with 1 or 2 ideas for a guerilla marketing plan, targeting the most profitable markets and customers
- check on operations one more time - by now you've probably made as many cuts as possible - just check to be sure things stay efficient as you expand
- look for opportunities to partner up to pursue new ideas and growth, to limit risk and increase your odds of success.

The bottom line is, don't go it alone! Get everyone involved in putting a plan down on paper and making it happen. In areas where you're struggling, get expert advice to help you break through.


Andi Gray is president of Strategy Leaders Inc., www.StrategyLeaders.com, a business consulting firm that specializes in helping entrepreneurial firms grow. She can be reached by phone at 877-238-3535. Do you have a question for Andi? Please send it to her, via e-mail at AskAndi@StrategyLeaders.com or by mail to Andi Gray, Strategy Leaders Inc., 5 Crossways, Chappaqua, NY 10514. Visit www.AskAndi.com for an entire library of Ask Andi articles.

Business owners regularly turn to Ask Andi and Strategy Leaders for advice on how to grow profitable, successful companies. They find what they need time after time. Specific advice is available at www.AskAndi.com. Ask Andi is also published weekly in the Westchester and Fairfield County Business Journals and Hudson Valley Business. Written by Strategy Leaders President, Andi Gray, the Ask Andi column is a rich source of advice for owners of established, privately held businesses.

If you are a business owner and you have a question or would like to discuss some aspect of your business, call 1.877.238.3535 or send an email to AskAndi@StrategyLeaders.com.