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The b-to-b to-do list for a down market

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Yes, these are recessionary, inflationary times. Everywhere you turn there are tales of doom and gloom. However, as a resilient direct marketer, it's time for you to re-examine and refine your strategies. When you make it through this slowdown, you'll come out way ahead when happy days are here again.

With that said, here's your to-do list to eke out success during hard times;

- **Mail smarter. Mail less.** With response rates presumed to be weakening, it's time to trim larger continuations, use the D&B or infoUSA out-of-business file as a suppress, and have three good reasons to justify your list tests. Does a "safe" retest have the long-term upside of a bold new niche test?
- **Focus on retention.** Make your mail pieces interesting and relevant to individual needs. Try to strike a balance between undercommunicating and flooding the poor customer. Ask the customer how often she wants to be mailed: monthly, quarterly, twice a year? Respect the customer's wishes and set up customizable contact strategies.
- **Address inflation head-on.** Your customers are worried about inflation. Assure them that you understand. Use dot-whacks (stickers or representation of stickers put on mailers indicating new information or a new offer), inkjet messages, CII (inside front cover) greetings, wraps or any other means to say "No price increase," "Same price as last year," "2007 prices still in effect" or "Good customer discount."
- **Reactivate former customers.** Split older names into different streams, not just by year or by simple RFM. Analyze gender, primary versus secondary contact, product line bought, total customer sales and company history. Make merges as large as possible and include all kinds of data, such as lapses and formers, flagging those who appear as multibuyers from other sources.
- **Target extended sibling company lists.** These customer contacts are very inexpensive. Add them to your merge, make sure they're still valid contacts, and analyze them. They once bought something, which shows they do make purchase decisions.
- **Be ultracreative with creative.** Any mail piece can be improved, and every offer can be made more enticing. Remember this: Product benefits rule, not product qualities. Why are your products and services better and how will they help your customer thrive? If your competitors have inferiorities, find a reasonable way to point them out.
- **Pay attention to competitors.** What are they mailing? How are they mailing? Who are they mailing to? What unique selling proposition do they stress the most? If I gave you a copy of their mail plans, what would you do with it? If you could see their product development plans for next year, could you beat them to the punch?
- **Improve merge/purge.** Usually viewed as boring, technical gobbledegook, this is one easy area to clean things up, cut costs and boost response. Work with your service bureau to establish the correct logic. Too loose, and you manufacture false dupes. Too tight, and you miss real ones. Fine-tune it by studying a printed dupe roster, and a printed clean roster and you will see things you wish you hadn't. Dupe allocation can help grow your universe or make every list test fail. Talk to an expert.
- **Get to know your customers.** Understand their demographics, their firmographics and their relationships to the other 15 million businesses in the U.S. Maybe you don't know them as well as you should. Study them, enhance them and talk about them. So what if 10% of your customers are in California? 10% of everything is in California. Understand the differences—the deltas—the overrepresentations and the underrepresentations compared to the real world. Then you can approach the big lists and the databases and extract the right subfiles.
- **Be careful when mailing this fall.** Emotional presidential elections are terrible for consumer mailers and it may interfere with us b-to-b marketers, too. A clogged mail stream and gloomy voters can be a perfect storm. Don't get caught in that one. These down cycles usually last about two years, which means this one is about half over. Roll up your sleeves, keep your to-do list in front of you, and get it done. If you check them all off, it will set the stage for next year and your future success.

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