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Pointing your business in the right direction

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smart **Business** matters

Advice for Success!™

Have Yourself a Merry, and Green, Little Holiday

Take steps to maximize your profits through the holidays and the coming months, whether this is your busiest — or slowest — season.

It's better to give, *and* fun to receive.

Who doesn't appreciate a thoughtful gift over the holidays? Gifts to valued customers say "thank you," strengthen business relationships, and keep you in your customers' thoughts. Customize your gift if possible. Does your customer collect birdhouses? Appreciate a fine wine or crave Mexican food? Exercise faithfully or play a sport? If you're not sure what your customer likes, useful items such as calendars, pens, and jotters or small candies and chocolates will also be appreciated. Some customers may be unable to accept a personal gift, but perhaps you can provide a gift that the whole office will enjoy.



Thoughts do count.

If you can't afford gifts, take time to send a card. It's not necessary to spend an excessive amount of money, but be sure the card is of good quality. Send cards with more inclusive phrasing such as "Happy Holidays" or "Best Wishes for the New Year," unless you're sure of religious affiliation. A handwritten note of thanks and a hand-addressed envelope add an extra personal touch.

Cut. Action!

If this is your busiest season, you *have* stepped back, assessed your needs, and developed a plan to make the most of it, right?

Over the summer, retailers strategize, review products, and place orders for items they hope to sell between November and December. Be sure you have the right mix of product and price points, necessary equipment, and proper staffing in place.

Assess your business throughout the season.

Determine if there are products or services your customers want that you could easily reposition yourself to provide or a void in the competition's services that you could fill. Continue to stay on top of your business during your busy season, and it will be easier to make

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The Holiday Party: Three tips to keep your party festive!

A company party is a great way to show appreciation for and thanks to your employees, bring your work force even closer together by connecting on a social level, and reinforce morale. Keep the festivities positive, light, and fun by following these three suggestions.

Lead by example.

It might be wise to follow advice given to employees about company party etiquette: don't drink too much, don't talk too much about yourself or about business, network, and introduce yourself to new staff members. Welcome your employees, toast to their health, and offer your praise and thanks. Keep things cordial and fun. If you want to provide a quick "snapshot" of the company's success, be brief — nothing like a long dry speech to dampen the party spirit.

If possible, limit alcohol consumption.

With an increase of alcohol comes the inevitable decrease in inhibitions that can lead to embarrassing moments, ill will, and safety issues. If you celebrate off-site, it may be difficult to regulate the amount served, but you can eliminate "open bar" or set a limit on free drinks by using drink coupons. If the party is on-site, consider the legal ramifications of providing alcohol. Don't let the ale flow too freely, and provide an ample amount of non-alcoholic beverages. A small, but thoughtful selection of upscale wines and microbrews can be an appreciative gesture and encouragement for people to drink responsibly. An alternative might be to mix up some tasty, but non-alcoholic, concoctions. Or host an activity-related (and alcohol-free) party — a beach or golf outing or a bowling or bocce match, for example.

You do not have to spend a fortune to have fun.

Set up a budget that you can live with once the party's over. Whether you keep it small and simple, or lean toward a more extravagant outing, pay attention to the quality of presentation and make your employees feel welcome, appreciated, and at ease. It should never feel like an obligation to attend. Delegate party planning to Human Resource personnel or someone with a creative flair. Some companies throw themed parties to add to the excitement, but even tasteful decorations can add excitement to your function. Let that person with the knack for decorating lend a hand!

Gift Giving

This season, think about purchasing small gifts for potential customers as well as for your regular customers. A small gift to a prospective client will help keep you in mind for future projects in the New Year.

If this is a customer's busy time, treat the staff to breakfast, lunch, or dinner, and deliver it in person. One sales representative often made the rounds during the Christmas season bearing Chinese take-out to treat store and office employees who were too busy to go out for lunch. He also pitched in to help them sell their merchandise, no matter who supplied it. Having already made his sales for the season, he had time to visit his customers and deliver two gifts they could really use: food and help! You can believe he was one of the first sales representatives to be considered when it came time to restock.



Prevent Good Meetings from Going Bad

“Another meeting! If I didn’t ‘waste’ so much time in meetings, I might get some ‘real work’ done.” If you feel this way, your meetings may benefit from some fine-tuning. Take seven steps today to make your meetings more productive.

Have an objective and an agenda.

Without an objective or agenda, time spent in a meeting can lead to less than stellar results. Set clear objectives, like project updates, creation of incentives to drive sales in a sector, or brainstorming cost-cutting measures. Be clear about the parameters of the discussion, and don’t overload the agenda. Provide attendees with the objective and agenda prior to the meeting.

Limit the number of participants.

Sometimes less is more. Too many participants can slow the meeting process down. Office staff may be able to handle some of the objectives before the meeting via e-mail or memo, which can reduce the number of participants to key representatives. Determine who needs to be present and create a plan to keep all those affected by the decision-making process “in the loop.”

Be generous with time, but not too generous.

Thirty minutes may be enough time to devote to a project update, but not enough if you are brainstorming on acquiring new technology for the office. Allow enough time for full consideration of the objective under discussion. Remember, meetings that last more than two hours can be draining. It may be best to schedule several meetings to discuss more complex issues, or, if you must meet for two or more hours, schedule one or two short breaks to allow people to move, check for important messages, and visit the restroom. When you break, set a firm time to resume and don’t allow discussion to continue into the break. Be sure to resume sharply on time, even if not all are back.



Meet, don’t eat!

Have plenty of water available, but unless you are planning a social event, it is best to keep food out of the conference room. The focus should be on collaborative effort to create effective business solutions, not on passing the roast beef. If a meeting falls close to breakfast, lunch, or dinner, take a break to eat, or eat before or after the meeting. This solution offers time to socialize in a work setting and time to get down to the business of working.

Someone must lead so that all may succeed.

A meeting with no facilitator can render meetings ineffective and inefficient. A facilitator encourages informative, yet succinct, input from everyone and allows time for everyone to offer their perspectives and viewpoints. Some of the best ideas may come from staffers who are often overlooked in light of more gregarious employees. The better and varied the dialogue and input, the better the decision-making process.

Be clear about follow-up.

Dedicate time to set a follow-up meeting date and create a plan of action. Be sure that each of you knows what action is expected of you and when. It’s best to publish pertinent notes immediately after the meeting, including action items, decisions, and concerns. Any information that needs to be gathered should be sent to all meeting attendees well in advance of the next meeting for review.

Take advantage of available resources.

If you are having difficulty getting more from your meetings, there are many books available on the market that highlight meeting strategies. You might also consult with your business advisor for help in planning and facilitating your meetings. Better planning, time management, organization, and facilitation can go far in making meetings more productive.



the necessary adjustments to make the most of the holidays.

Glad tidings of comfort and joy for customers.

If you're prepared for business and nobody knows, will you actually make money? Spread the good word through advertisement in local papers, radio, television, and mailings. Update your website with new services or product and special offers throughout the season. Market your product, your price, and the value of your services; let people know you are there to fulfill their needs and keep their holidays merry!

Loss leaders and incentives

Generate as much traffic and excitement as possible to sell more this season. A low-cost, hot item can be the ticket to pull in more customers and provide you with a chance to "sell up." Discounts, a holiday dinner drawing, the chance to win a free iPod or other hot product, or a free small gift with a purchase or account opening can entice customers to spend their money with you, now! Incentives can be a great way to build more business during slow times as well!

Give something back

Giving something back to the community is the right thing to do, especially during the holiday season when people are more acutely aware of what they lack, be it a warm house or toys for their children. Your gift of services or money will be a gift to yourself in terms of personal fulfillment and the appreciation of your customers. Whatever you do, do it well! You may not have the time or assistance to tackle many marketing initiatives, but you should be able to focus your efforts on one or two that will make the holidays merrier, and a little greener!

Lock Up Your Laptop

The portability of a laptop may be its greatest asset, but it is also becoming a great liability. With laptop theft on the rise, be sure your personal and business documents are protected. Take these precautions, especially when taking your laptop on the road.

Cable it. Security cables for laptops can be purchased for under \$50.00 — a worthwhile investment for protecting your hardware and ensuring your personal information does not wind up in the wrong hands.

Password protect your laptop, or any other computer you work on. Logging off your laptop provides more security than simply shutting it down, and a secure password makes it more difficult for thieves to access your, and your company's, confidential information. You can also set your computer to go into sleep mode when not in use and to ask for a password upon resuming use.



Be aware of who's around you. Whether you're in a café sipping tea in London or a latte at Starbucks, be aware of the people around you. Others might easily view your screen display — including your security login and passwords. Purchase an inexpensive privacy screen that allows only you, and not passersby, to view your display.

Encrypt your data. There are programs available that encrypt the data in your hard drive, making it nearly impossible for others to access your information. Encryption software allows you to encrypt and password-protect more sensitive documents and e-mail.

Install firewall software. If you plan to send e-mail and surf the web, whether from home or on the road, install firewall protection to protect your laptop from any security breaches or virus attacks. Use the hardware and software necessary to keep your information safe if you plan to go wireless in your company, your home, or on the road.

No business like snow business... During a season in which business is off, do you throw up your hands and bemoan your losses, or do you look for new areas that can yield a bit of green? Take the example of the outdoor landscaper. In northern climates like our his business falls off to nothing — a good time for a vacation, **or** a good opportunity to expand business into another area such as plowing snow or securing indoor landscaping contracts for business offices and hotels.

When you hit a seasonal downturn, take time to rejuvenate yourself, but also plant the seeds for future growth. Research your competition and look for new clients, create new marketing materials, update your database, repair or add equipment, examine the return on the services you offer. Or, like the landscaper, cultivate new growth in a complimentary area.



Will Limkemann is an Accredited Associate of the Institute for Independent Business