



## 5 Ways to Jump-Start Sales When Your Customers Stop Buying

by Hamilton Wallace

You'll have to excuse me if I don't get too excited about "these economic times." As a small business marketing consultant I'm called into companies experiencing bad times more often than good.

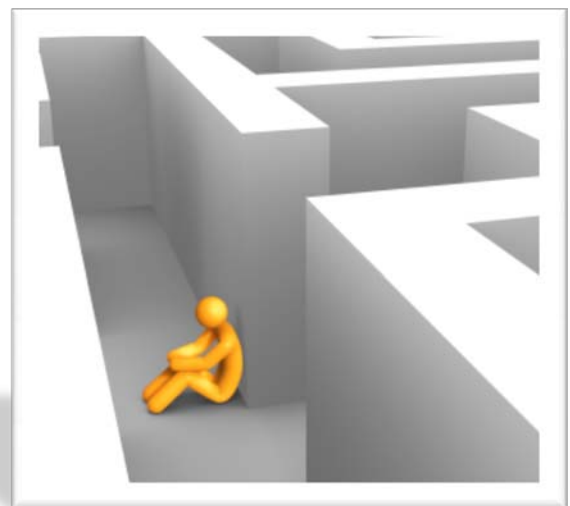
*Here are five strategies I've used to pull clients out of a downward trend in sales. I've done my best to keep them simple, with the goal of creating idea-starters for you.*

### 1. Get over it.

Two things are important here. First, no more whining or worrying. Those won't get you out of this. Every bit of energy and focus should be on the solution. Fear only slows you down. Action is your way out, not waiting.

Second, what got you here may not get you out of here. You may well need to get over or let go of how you've always done things and be open to new ways.

So, get over it. I don't say that to minimize your situation, only to get you back on the path to the solution as quickly as possible. If you can't get over it, you likely won't be willing to make the changes I'm about to suggest.



### 2. Sell to the people who are buying.

If your customers have slowed or stopped buying, who still is buying? I've never been invited into a company that didn't have at least one small segment of customers who found them. The company didn't spend a dime attracting them, zero sales efforts. Nonetheless, there they are.

A client that serves the residential market always had the occasional commercial customer find them. As

residential business slowed we started pushing commercial work and, thankfully, commercial customers are now making the difference. Another client is making the shift from private sector customers to government customers.

What group (groups?) of customers does this describe for you? Just because they account for a small percentage of your sales doesn't mean they're a small group. Think about it, they're out there.

Now, you may have to change things up some; your message, print new brochures, add a page or two to your website. Before you do, ask a handful of current customers in this group how and why they buy; what's important to them, what's going on in their world. Let them inform your marketing strategy.

### 3. Sell what people are buying.

I find many companies are stuck in their ways regarding what they sell. It may not be that people have stopped buying the type of training you sell, it may be they've stopped buying your version (two-day, in-house seminars, for example). It may not be that people have stopped buying landscaping, it may be they've stopped buying how you approach landscaping (high-end, complete re-designs of their yards, for example).

Understand there are other definitions of the product or service you sell that differ from yours. And understand you may need to change how you define what you sell to mold it into something people will buy right now. And no, it isn't as difficult as you think it is to make this change.



### 4. Change your message.



Part of your slowdown may be because your customers have started buying for different reasons. If your message is the same today as it was 18 months ago, you're marketing where your customers were, not where they are. Touting primo customer service in a downturn? I'll take a lower price. Waving the quality flag? I'll take reliability. What's interesting:

You can argue parts of your superior customer service actually lower the total cost of ownership or that quality translates into a more reliable product. But if you don't, if your brochures, website and salespeople are still talking about service and quality in a price/reliability world, you lose.

Change your message. Put the strengths of your product or service in the context of what's important to your customers right now.

Or simply highlight different strengths. I doubt what you sell is so one-dimensional you can't accomplish this.

Or, you may have to change your product or service to better reflect what's important to your current customer set (or, as in #2, find the people who are buying it). The two-day, in-house seminar training company might consider DVD or online training if that's what their customers are buying. The complete re-design-of-their-yards landscape contractor may consider unbundling design from what they sell and listening harder to what their customers want to spend.

## 5. Get efficient.



The message here is really twofold: save; and invest. I don't advise "gutting it out" with last year's overhead hoping to get back to last year's sales figures as quickly as possible. That isn't putting yourself in the best position to be successful.

Cut. Do it wisely, but do it sooner than later. This can be hard. I hear many owners say with pride, "Things are tough, but we haven't had to let anybody go yet." Cutting back can be seen as an admission things are bad, which nobody wants to admit.

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Make sure you invest at the same time. Make the employees you keep more efficient ([wireless telephone headsets](#), [business writing training](#) (write faster, save time), putting two monitors on their computer to make multi-tasking easier, etc.). Maybe it's time to get serious and: invest in CRM software and strengthen your prospect follow-up program; re-vamp your website to make it easier to buy; upgrade your accounting software to better track costs; get on an airplane for more customer face time.

This is not the time to sit on your hands and wait until things get better. Plus, chances are pretty good what you need to do going forward will be different. This is why you need to: first, get over it; then, look at who you're selling to, next, what you're selling; check the message you're sending against what's important to your target market NOW; and finally, get efficient. Simple? Yes. Easy? Not so much. Doable? Absolutely! When to start? NOW!

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