



The CEO Challenge for September 2010

The World Isn't Flat: Planning for a New 2011

Can you imagine being alive in the late 1400s when Christopher Columbus *didn't* sail off the edge of the world? After a lifetime of believing the world was flat, would you readily accept that it was round? Or **is it possible** that you might react as many others do when faced with a new reality ... by ignoring, denying, or actively denouncing the new belief?

THE WORLD IS DIFFERENT

I'm bringing up this history lesson because fall is the season for strategic planning, and 2011 presents tremendous opportunity and possibility for those companies who embrace the new realities of our changed marketplace. While competitors hold onto old ideas and dream that things will get back to "normal," agile, creative companies can leap ahead. In fact, Scott Allen, a writer and technology entrepreneur, summed it up nicely when he wrote, "The future is uncertain, and uncertainty is the playing field of the entrepreneur." Nimble companies (perhaps like yours!) have a huge advantage over older, slower, and/or larger organizations that are heavily vested in the past.

So during this planning season, tap into your company's entrepreneurial roots and celebrate 2011 with a positive outlook and a real understanding that change=opportunity.

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The monthly CEO Challenge is published by The Revenue Game, a revenue consultancy that helps clients generate predictable, profitable growth. To get in touch with us directly, please contact Jane Adamson, CEO, at (866) 356-8979 or janeadamson@therevenuegame.com.

EMBRACE CHANGE AND WIN

So how can you recognize and capitalize on new opportunities in 2011? In other CEO Challenge articles, we've written about the importance of "thinking like a Chief Revenue Officer" and developing a "revenue strategy" versus a corporate strategy. Those two mindsets embrace the five strategic planning concepts I've outlined below, so I encourage you to review them (share them with your leadership team, too!) and incorporate them into this action plan.

ACTION PLAN: EMBRACING CHANGE DURING YOUR 2011 PLANNING PROCESS

1. **One way to adjust your company's thinking is to change your vernacular to paint an image of a future filled with purpose, meaning, and relevance.**

The right language can make all the difference in the minds of your team and your customers. For example:

CHANGE	TO
Selling our new medicine	Saving lives
New pricing for travel packages	Helping dear friends re-connect
Cutting costs	Building a new growth model
Customer mistrust	Using social media to communicate honestly
Selling	Having a conversation
Positioning	Deep specialization
Reducing channels	Supporting the most passionate partners
Selling bio-diesel plants	Offering self-sufficiency to villagers in Africa

2. **Put the customer front and center.**

Today, companies that are most deeply in tune with their customers will beat those companies that aren't. To keep your customers top of mind, help your company visualize and hear customers at all times:

- Post pictures of your customers all over a wall in your conference room
- Before making any decision, ask the question "What would Fred say?" or "Why would Fred care?"
- Bring a stuffed doll to the conference room and address the doll as if he/she were the customer whose passionate approval you need
- Break your planning sessions into separate meetings with assignments to talk with customers about your idea before coming to the next session

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3. Make sure every member of your team can answer this question: “What’s the problem we solve that no one else solves?”

Answering this question requires an understanding of the high-level business problems your customers face. It does absolutely no good to talk to your customers about features and benefits and cost savings if you don’t understand the broad business issues they are dealing with every day. What you **think** is the problem may just be a symptom, or you may be off the mark altogether.

This question is typically very difficult to answer because true customer problems are frequently unspoken, or only identified through a deep understanding of how your customers use your product/service.

In addition, problems also exist on a personal level with your buyer:

- The problem may have to do with ease of use: *“They’re a hassle to work with.”*
- The problem may have to do with confidence: *“What will my boss think if I recommend this firm over another?”*
- The problem may have to do with a fear the customer has: *“I don’t know much about this topic and I don’t want the salesperson to think I’m not competent.”*
- The problem may have to do with a risk the customer doesn’t want to take: *“What would happen if my bag gets lost en-route and I have to look good in that important meeting tomorrow?”*
- The problem may have to do with packaging: *“I don’t want people to think I bought something cheap”*

Don’t talk features and benefits... solve problems.

4. Get real about execution

A few years ago, Rick and I facilitated a planning session that concluded with the development of a detailed execution plan. During a casual lunch break, one of the participants commented that a man named Joe was working in a remote office for the next six months.

Rick and I looked at each other and said, “How can that be the case? We just agreed that Joe would drive an important initiative that requires his presence in this office!”

Silence.

It turned out that the team had agreed Joe should drive the initiative because he was the only one with the required skill level. They simply ignored the fact that Joe wasn’t truly available to execute in the way the company needed. They assumed it would all be fine. Unfortunately, that is never the case.

Don’t make the mistake of planning if execution isn’t taken seriously and realistically. That means assigning responsibility, allocating resources, establishing timeframes with regular milestones, identifying and removing obstacles, aligning support requirements, setting metrics, and tracking progress.

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Weak execution demoralizes the team and creates a culture of non-performance that cannot be sustained in the market we're in now.

5. Start now. Doing this right takes time.

Have you noticed that life is speeding up at an alarming rate? It was just a short time ago that companies created five-year plans. No longer. A long-term horizon is now two years and planning takes place in smaller and smaller increments. Six months ago, Arizona companies had never heard of the immigration bill known as SB1070. Now it's affecting every business in the state with no sense of what the affects will look like by Thanksgiving.

Planning is a continual process, not an event. Your company can start taking steps RIGHT NOW, even before you've launched your official process for 2011. For example, RIGHT NOW you can:

- Start recruiting the right players so they have time to come on board and get fully up to speed
- Talk with more customers to [identify true customer problems](#)
- Start marketing early enough to generate leads
- [Test critical assumptions](#) that your company is making
- [Start tracking new metrics](#)
- Train all members of the revenue chain
- [Test new messaging](#)

CONCLUSION

Believe it or not, “revenue strategic planning” should be FUN! It's all about finding the right mix that will propel your company's success in the niche you choose to dominate. You'll talk with more customers and prospects, learn more, try out new ideas, and identify what works.

Don't abdicate your strength of agility to the larger players. Don't keep waiting for a “recovery” to the old ways. Never before have we seen such a confluence of forces come together to take small companies to great heights.

Welcome to 2011!

What do you think?
Please share your thoughts and experiences with us here!

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