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THE GRASS MIGHT BE GREENER: *Outsourcing Innovation*

If you think there are “no new ideas under the sun,” you just might be focusing too much on the patches of grass you’ve been trampling underfoot. Familiarity often leads to such shortsightedness. So do the practices of being excessively formula-driven or too guarded.

The same people going through the same processes with the same mindset seldom produce inventive results. Neither does enshrouding your design needs in secrecy. Certainly, these days the heightened challenge of having to do more with appreciably less has many small businesses backed into the cave of safe steps and utter self-reliance. Though they know surviving pressing times can require innovation, they are not convinced of the wisdom of looking outward for it. And both the apprehension factor and affordability raise concerns.

Skeptical entrepreneurs remain tethered to memories of home-grown approaches, systems, and devices working well enough. So, understandably, the logic of farming out functions in a recession might not register comfortably with them. The notion of spending money to have an outside agency do something you’ve always done yourself can be daunting—especially when your income streams have slowed significantly. After all, even though successfully running a business necessitates risk-taking, it does also demand sound judgment.

On the other hand, larger companies, having survived the ebb and flow of more than a few downturn-upswing cycles, can attest to the value of reaching past uncertainty and uneasiness. They’ve stretched threadbare budgets to invest in the promise of outside ingenuity. In “*Why Outsourcing Innovation Makes Sense*” (*BusinessWeek* - 7/22/09), Reena Jana and Venessa Wong discuss how companies, from aerospace industry giants to pharmaceutical leaders, rely on innovation consultants to jumpstart their economic recovery efforts. Even if major players have fewer innovation outsourcing dollars, the article points out that they embrace the wisdom of retaining affiliations with external think tanks. “The idea of outsourcing innovation might seem counterintuitive to the pressures of a recession, but it’s a strategy that...can provide fresh perspectives—(saving) hours of time and effort in terms of industry research.”

Choosing to recast “crisis” as “opportunity,” most big businesses are banking on outside creativity to preserve their capacity not only to stay afloat in turbulent times but to regenerate themselves in the event of a collapse. Also, by exploring the fresh grasses of independent research and development firms, organizations worldwide are setting themselves up for product and service enhancements that can give them a stronger competitive advantage.

And, wonderfully, this same concept can be scaled to fit any small enterprise. You don’t have to keep an innovation expert on a retainer; there are other access avenues that could serve your interests well. Participating in workshops, webinars, and coaching retreats could stimulate your own burst of creativity. Rather than doing the actual work for you, innovation trainers can take you through a series of mind-bending exercises, or coax you through comfort zone-shattering activities, or simply reveal the ingredients common to recipes for creativity.

In “*How the Creative Stay Creative*” (*Inc.* - 6/08), Leigh Buchanan reveals how some of the nation’s top innovation consultants develop imaginative work forces. The piece provides a good snapshot of the kinds of tips and techniques you might pick up from creativity specialists if outsourcing isn’t feasible. Among them are the following recommendations:

Encourage Risky Behavior - One company sets aside a date annually to challenge employees to attempt a personally daring feat, such as skydiving, starting to write a novel, or public speaking.

Get Multicultural - One CEO says, "People with different genetic backgrounds tend to have healthier children. It's the same with ideas as it is with biology."

Provide Free Time to Think - Build in hours or whole days where every team member can escape the confines of the office (physically and/or mentally) to focus on *thinking* or even personal creative pursuits.

Bring in Outsiders - If your team is staring at a brick wall, maybe interacting with an actor, a poet, a minister or a scientist can spark the energy and insight needed to punch through, go over, or find a way around it.

Write It Down - Publish a newsletter highlighting topics that excite employees. Focus on universal stimulants, like "Ten Steps to a More Satisfied You," or tailor articles to specific team member interests and dreams.

Mix Up Your People - Physically expose your people to one another's work processes and environment—not for cross-training purposes but for sheer contact. This periodic practice can boost understanding and yield fresh insights.

Be Very Flexible - Relax the *way* you work. Slackening the reins doesn't mean your people will veer off course. In fact, extra breathing room generally signals respect for the individual and considerable confidence in others' abilities.

When you open your mind, broaden your gaze, and roam beyond the security gates of what's familiar, you can find innovative inspiration that suits your business needs.

MARTA Business Opportunities

The procurement and contract opportunities noted below can be found on the Internet at www.itsmarta.com. Because dates for noted events are subject to change, you should contact MARTA's Contracts & Procurement and Materials Division at (404) 848-5131 for verification.

NAME OF BID/PROPOSAL	CONTRACT NUMBER	BID/PROPOSAL OPENING/DEADLINE DATE (Eastern Standard Time)
Pre-Solicitation Notice for the Atlanta Streetcar Project	RFP P19392	CANCELLED
Stonecrest Park & Ride Lot	CP B19088	April 28, 2010 at 2:00 PM
Elevator & Escalator Maintenance Services	CP B19655	April 28, 2010 at 3:00 PM
Police Uniforms	CP B19941	May 13, 2010 at 2:00 PM
Tunnel Lighting Upgrades - Vine City Station to West Lake & Bankhead Stations	CP B18161	May 27, 2010 at 2:00 PM

Prospective vendors are urged to visit MARTA's web site for weekly updates.

Announcements

WEDA WORKSHOPS

The Women's Economic Development Agency (WEDA) offers various workshops to small business owners. For registration information, contact WEDA at (678) 904-2201 or <http://www.weda-atlanta.org/registration.htm>.

U. S. SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

DISASTER LOANS - GEORGIA #11886 & #11887 (Disaster #GA-00027)

For the Counties of Bartow, Carroll, Catoosa, Chattooga, Cherokee, Cobb, Coweta, DeKalb, Douglas, Fulton, Gwinnett, Heard, Newton, Paulding, Rockdale, Stephens and Walker; and for Economic Injury Only the contiguous counties of Banks, Barrow, Butts, Clayton, Dade, Dawson, Fayette, Floyd, Forsyth, Franklin, Gordon, Habersham, Hall, Haralson, Henry, Jackson, Jasper, Meriwether, Morgan, Pickens, Polk, Spalding, Troup, Walton and Whitfield in the State of Georgia; contiguous counties of Cherokee, Cleburne, and DeKalb:

Filing Deadline for applications for Economic Injury: June 24, 2010

For More Information, contact SBA at 1-800-659-2955 or www.sba.gov.

MARTA Information

All public events (i.e., bid openings and conferences) are held at the MARTA Headquarters Building, 2424 Piedmont Road, NE, Atlanta, Georgia 30324, unless otherwise indicated.

Most solicitations may be downloaded free of charge and are available via the web at www.itsmarta.com. Solicitations with drawings may be ordered for the above noted contracts via telephone by contacting MARTA's Documentation Control Branch at (404) 848-5580 or other sources as indicated.

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