

Taking stock and moving forward in the New Year



The New Year offers us a clean slate, and as such, it is an excellent opportunity to take stock and re-assess utilization of available resources. Of course this year, the need to do so is even greater than usual.

Looking back, the advent of the Internet and the concurrent onslaught of constant technological innovation and globalization created many new opportunities, but it also generated a pace of change that has forced both individuals and corporations to adapt at faster and faster speeds. The growing necessity for change and innovation was challenging enough when the global economy was running well. However, with the recent financial meltdown, we now have a dramatic lever forcing all companies to face facts.

What can companies do to leverage the strategic necessity of constant change and innovation in a new world economic order?

One basic step is to systematically manage the way that decision-making information is obtained and utilized. All companies have mechanisms in place to monitor finance-related activities. But many are lacking well-coordinated approaches to staying abreast of broader-based market information that is also critical for decision-making. Having a robust system in place is especially useful in times where speed is of the essence.

The elements of a well-coordinated approach are simple:

First – List up relevant facts and figures needed for decision-making. These can include everything from market size and segmentation to competitor pricing to consumer brand awareness. Update and fill in the answers as much as possible, while identifying gaps for further exploration. Prioritize the items, keeping in mind that not all may be perfectly obtainable.

Next - Decide on the most efficient means of filling these information gaps. Some statistics can be garnered from published sources; however, since they are often dated,

custom development of certain statistics is usually required. Both customers and suppliers are a valuable source of “real-time” information, if cultivated properly.

Ongoing – Monitor, update, and fill gaps on a regular basis. Having one person take responsibility for this activity with regular reporting requirements is important, or else things will slip, and then the information won’t be all that it can be.

One important resource is often over-looked in developing an approach to staying abreast of broader-based market information, and that is “employees.” It is true that it requires time and commitment to solicit and review employee ideas, and many companies make the mistake of taking a shortcut – i.e., making decisions without going through the “employee idea mining” process. However, I would suggest that developing an ongoing dialog with employees in this way also serves as a way to engage them in monitoring and leveraging on market situations.

Inside every organization’s employees lies a world of creativity and knowledge, and this ideally needs to be tapped on a regular basis as an important aspect of staying on top of market information, as well as spurring change and innovation. The type of change and innovation I am talking about is not just in new products, services, and marketing programs – but also in terms of improving work processes to make them more effective, or in terms of reacting to (or capitalizing on) volatile market situations.

The idea is to consistently utilize the combined power of existing information (i.e., from secondary and primary sources) and the intellectual capital that exists in every organization to unleash new insights.

Debbie Howard is President of Japan Market Resource Network and President Emeritus of the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan.

