

"Hit the road, Jack!"

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"Woe is me! Woe is me!"

I can't tell you how many business owners I heard utter those, or similar, words during the current recession. Contractors, subs, architects, engineers, real estate brokers, developers, appraisers—you name it—each lamenting the lack of work under his roof.

At first, I was sympathetic. Even though my business has remained relatively strong, I understand that a lot of the problems that befalling those folks are, to a large extent, beyond their control. A souring economy and frightened, skittish consumers can easily undermine the best strategic plans. But as the recession has lingered, my empathy diminished greatly. Why? Because I see many owners adopting a "bunker mentality" in response to the tough times. "Hole up, hibernate, and call me when it's over" is their philosophy. "Then I'll come out and play again."

Not only is this strategy fundamentally wrong (not to mention, stupid), but it goes counter to one of business' least understood truths—people want to do business with the boss!

What do I mean by that? Simply this: Let's assume for the moment you're an architect (though the example applies to virtually any business). You're constantly being visited by "business development specialists" (an upscale term for salespeople), often with titles as impressive as vice president, seeking to promote their firm's contracting capabilities and persuade you to recommend or choose them for your next project.

Think for a minute, however, how would you react if, all of a sudden, instead of some hired hand, in walked the company's owner. You know, the head honcho, the guy whose name is on the side of the truck? Wouldn't that create a more favorable impression, give you the feeling that you were important enough to command the attention of the top guy?

And when you got down to talking specifics, wouldn't a commitment from this guy carry a lot more weight than one from an underling? After all, the boss doesn't need anyone else's approval—it's his money, his company and his reputation on the line. He's going to find a way to do what he promises, come hell or high water.

And lastly, doesn't a visit from the boss indicate something about his priorities—that the customer is #1? To me (and to most people) it says he cares, that he really wants to know how his company is perceived and he wants to hear it firsthand from the people who pay his salary, not from those who have a vested interest in stroking him.

Nothing is more effective, nor can it take the place in a client's mind, of a boss sitting across from him. And that goes for existing clients, as well as prospects. Your very presence sends a signal that can be the difference between getting or losing a project. Look around at the more successful firms in your field and you'll see that the boss is active and highly visible, not chained to his desk

cultivating a big butt.

Keep in mind also that this advice is just as relevant in good times. So, if you're the top guy, get out of the office! And if you're not the big cheese, but work for someone who hasn't seen the inside of a client's office in months (or years), clip this article and anonymously leave it on his desk. Or, you can simply tell him, "Woody says, 'Hit the road, Jack!'"

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