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Founder's Message: Out of sight, out of mind

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I was recently very honored to receive a telephone call from an executive of a leading advertising agency in Boston. "I have quality clients who own shopping centers and office buildings who normally have big budgets and don't mind throwing it around in four-color slick magazine ads, sponsorships of award dinners and golf tournaments, sports promotions, TV stuff and a website that costs a lot. They now find themselves in the same recession boat as everyone else, but I'm not quite sure what to tell them. You've been dealing in that industry for a long time. What's your advice?"

I was flattered that I was being consulted despite the fact that I have been marketing commercial real estate for years, longer than a lot of today's prominent agencies and development firms. Does that make me a dinosaur? No! And I'll tell you why and I'll tell you what I told him. (Actually it was a her).

History does repeat itself, so what we learned about the last recession will be the same as this one. The companies that totally stop their advertising will be actually announcing, loud and clear, one of three things:

1. We are in trouble.
2. We are going out of business.
3. We died.

In other words, total disappearance will lead to limited chances of survival. The company that has been spending to build an image, now should spend a lot less, but target their market. No more displays in The Wall Street Journal, NY Times, USA Today, Time Magazine or any magazine for that matter. In my career, four-color, slick magazine advertising has never sold more office, retail or industrial space. Most buildings I've seen aren't colorful. Web advertising is good, especially if you can find something regional. Just like the doctor who will never tell you about the herb supplement that needs no prescription, the agency isn't about to tell you about some advertising you can do that costs little since they receive 15%.

I think the agent, who didn't deny what I had said, was offended at that reality and told me that she didn't believe she could say that to her client. I strongly suggested that it was chicanery and greed that caused the current recession and it would be truth and humbleness that would get us out of it. "Tell the client the truth," I said. "Then find inexpensive ways to promote his product to people who can use it. Study the market. Find media that specializes in reaching your client's prospects, start building a relationship with that media for you and your client."

I recently invited myself to a real estate function to take pictures. The executive told me I had to pay. "I'm attending as the press," I said. "You don't have to even feed me. I'm just going to take pictures and put them in the paper." He said, "We don't need the press." I wonder where that guy will be working in six months.

Just about 100 years ago (or more) Henry Ford decided to stop all advertising. "I don't need to

advertise," he said. "Everyone buys Fords." For that arrogant mistake, it took him two years of heavy advertising to get back to number one.

I was here in 1989-1991 (the last recession that put a lot of firms out of business) and learned first hand that when times were tough, some of the smart companies advertised more in the "right" places knowing that the competition would be less. That made sense to me, and I saw it work. So I told this agent to do something that she had never done before. "Find a media that cares. Ask them for a big discount. In tough times, one hand washes the other. We go from greedy times, where we not only don't do unto our neighbors, but don't even recognize that they exist, to the way (I think) things were meant to be. Humble times when everyone sheds their masks and pulls together." She accused me of clichés. So I wrapped it up by saying, "I notice that all famous clichés come from tough times. The squeaky wheel gets the grease. The pen is mightier than the sword. Out of sight out of mind."

She thanked me and hung up. By the way, I admit that I'm bias to our newspaper because we care and are willing to prove it with our actions. Let's see how many of her clients she sends my way. I'll report the results to you next month.

Roland Hopkins is the founder of the New York Real Estate Journal, Norwell, Mass.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540