



Emergence plan may signal better times

By Jim Kendall | Daily Herald Columnist
Contact writer

My favorite college football team played, and won, its first bowl game in 26 years to end 2008, proof that bad stretches do end. Here is hopefully more pertinent proof: Tom Walter has his mostly 20-something team at Tasty Catering developing an emergence plan, "the steps we will take as the business cycle turns and consumer confidence grows."

When might that happen?

Walter's financial people will give the signal when they believe the upward tick has started, but "We believe the end of the second quarter is when the turn will begin," Walter says. "Our emergence plan starts at the beginning of the second quarter." Tasty Catering's success has come in part because Walter, president of the Elk Grove Village company, is willing to listen to his young management and staff. Meetings a week ago, for example, were intended to produce a "common plan to grow the business" of the three related Tasty Catering companies.

Next up: Team meetings about "how we will handle the growth in 2009 after the economy regenerates."

Successful entrepreneurs by nature are positive people, and it could be that Walter simply has reverted to positive form - except that he also has a disaster plan on the table. That plan "takes decreases in business at five percent intervals for each week, month and quarter, and has action steps to control losses as well as action steps to increase business," Walter says.

Walter clearly leaves little to chance - a planning model many of the rest of us might want to consider. The economic mess Washington and Wall Street have given us will end, although we may have to do much of the digging out ourselves.

In that context, development of an emergence plan may be an idea worth copying. So are some ideas from Brian Basilico, director of direction (a creative guy's way of saying president and CEO) at B2b Interactive Marketing, Aurora.

Among Basilico's thoughts:

- Do your annual business planning each week. If business planning is intended to keep your enterprise on track, why, Basilico asks, do it just once a year? Monthly is better. Weekly might be best, especially short-term.
- Be realistic. "Goals should be achievable, not pipe dreams that inevitably lead to frustration," Basilico says.
- Stop making do. It might be a black and white printer when you really need color for new business presentations, a copier that likes to jam or an additional employee to lighten your workload. Spend the money.

"Set a goal to stop putting off getting what you need," Basilico says. "The exasperation of making do isn't worth it."

- Give up what's not working. "Don't invest energy trying to make the unworkable workable," Basilico says. "Not every product is a best seller."

The New Year has barely begun - and almost certainly will be better.