

THINK DIFFERENTLY

In the first issue of VI magazine for 2020 I stated, “New decade, new opportunities to review, assess and modify for new and challenging conditions. Do you have a clear 2020 vision for your business?”

Wow, how things have changed. My follow up article challenged readers with, ‘What’s next?’ Aiming to have everyone thinking about Post COVID-19 ... hmm. As I write this article we are plummeting back into closing borders and potential major issues in the future.

Time for some real tested practical tips and to raise the question, “Why are some sign and print companies booming and some failing?” Let’s get positive. No, not to COVID-19, lets get a positive attitude ... like NOW. By the time, you read this there will be probably five months of this year left, so I am offering you five hot tips to make a difference to your business.

This article is going to focus on the future and offer practical ideas or observations I have witnessed over the preceding months and discussions with sign and print clients.

Funny thing, my header of “Build YOUR 2020 Vision and reshape your future” is still relevant and hopefully you acted back in February 2020 and are in a better position than you were. If you didn’t here is your chance to catch up. As now after the new spike in COVID-19 we all must take far more drastic and positive actions.

These ideas are presented so YOU can consider and decide your optimum steps forward:

1. WHY – You need to question your actions!

Over the last months I have witnessed a variety of organisations who are either in boom or bust. Obviously, the big question is, “Why is there such a difference?” I suggest there are many reasons. There is no surprise that the difference is in most cases – the booming organisations have developed the ability to market themselves, look critically at their organisation, assess their customer profiles and the types of marketplaces they are in. The burning question is, “Are you asking why you shouldn’t be doing this and getting to the real core of what you need to



be doing to future proof your business?” Here is a tip, every morning when you arrive at work ask yourself this simple question, “Why am I doing it this way today?” Why not go a step further and ask yourself at the start of each new project for a few days to get used to challenging yourself! It’s all part of learning to think differently.

Develop a one-page business plan. There is a good lesson to learn if you have a look at our health authorities and our government. Over the decades’ these types of institutions are usually considered ponderous and take months to make a simple decision. Right at this moment in time, they are making quite timely decisions and taking decisive actions. They have changed from procrastinators to agile thinking. Australia has been leading the world in tackling the COVID-19 problem. Yes it’s life threatening and I for one am very pleased indeed that they have taken decisive action. This is a good example of exactly what you should be doing in your business. I’m not going to suggest you write pages and pages of the typical old school business plan.

With mental health issues on the rise and enormous business pressures, I’m asking you to give your business a simple diagnostic in the form of a one-page business plan health check. In fact, I would like you to get a notepad, your stakeholders and team around you and throw a few ideas around in writing, even just bullet points and action

steps for your business. Then ‘just do it’. This can push your business to the next level rather than slip back to mediocrity. Do not get wound up in reams of paper, grandiose ideas or large expensive schemes rather stick to the KISS principle of keeping it simple. Don’t be embarrassed about the outcome of ideas, and if you cannot afford a consultant to have a look at it for you, then ask one of your colleagues within the industry or even a confidante that you consider can offer you some mentor advice. The greatness of this whole exercise is having something in writing to act on. To look critically at the business, reassess and adjust and repeat the process. If you are stuck for an idea or the basis of the template of a business plan, I am happy to send you one. However, what I am really saying you just need a one-page list and act on what you’ve come up with. Do Something! I’ll even offer to read and discuss the first 20 Business plans I receive to my email address below – free of charge.

2. Creativity – put your designer and creative hat back on!

It is very easy to fall prey of the feeling sorry for yourself syndrome. Most people in the sign and print industry joined the industry because they are creative. One of a creative’s greatest strengths is observation and willingness to take a challenge on. Ask yourself are you challenging yourself and your business to give it the very best during these difficult times? The million-dollar question over the last few months is, “Why is one sign or print business



winning and others are going into liquidation?" Sure, it's not a one-size fits all answer. But the answer is available, therefore as the title of the article suggests "think differently". It's time to break out of the box and throw out traditional thinking. Here are two key observations to challenge yourself:

Marketplaces: If your business has dried up because you're restricted to one or two marketplaces, perhaps it's time to assess your equipment, staff and opportunities in other marketplaces? Let me give you an example, you don't have to be a genius to work out that marketplaces like travel, airlines, exhibition work, holidays especially overseas holidays, luxury goods have all taken a huge hit. Step back and have a look at your business and potentially some of the smaller clients that may have previously only represented five or 10% of your business. Can the customer be groomed into key clients?

There are many models that work in balancing the percentage break-ups of industries to support your business in down times. By way of a broader explanation, if you had 80% of your customers in one of the sectors I mentioned above I'd suggest you really know you have some real problems! Rather than have all your eggs in one basket, consider a better spread of clients and I suggest the perfect blend would be 20 customers that represent 5% of your business each. Why? Even if you lost one or two of those customers you're only potentially losing 10% of your

business. What I'm saying – I'm talking to clients out there in the marketplace who are sign companies that have lost 80 or 90% of the business because all their business was in one area.

The flipside of qualifying markets in these testing times are not easy to find and nor may they suit your business. However, if you are not out there challenging yourself you could be heading the way of the Dodo bird or the dinosaur!

How are you perceived? Let's say you have decided on another marketplace, a key strength in your company's creativity is looking the part. By way of example let's compare the bold and sometimes brash look of a motor vehicles graphic businesses versus an architectural sign company business. Both are branded very differently their look and feel are very different in the appearance solely because of the marketplace and its buyers. By way of providing an analogy, you won't be accepted for dinner and a high-class à la Carte restaurant in thongs and a t-shirt, whereas you would be accepted at a fast food franchise. Sure, you are still going to have something to eat but the whole dining experience is completely different.

3. Embrace – Social media opportunities.

The very best customers you will ever have are relationship-based clients. Relationships thrive on regular contact and discussions. A good relationship builds trust, respect and loyalty. The ability to engage your customers remotely over long distances seamlessly and almost automatically is not something you should be overlooking consciously unless that's your decision to literally alienate large sectors of your marketplace past, present and future. It's honestly that simple.

Looking back over a few years we didn't see the police department using FaceBook®. Just a handful of large corporates took on board the concept of Instagram® or Twitter® and in fact any of the major social media platforms. I'm not suggesting for a second they are all perfect for your business. As we all know, most businesses are unique, as are the owners and especially the type of work that they do. Unless you fallen down a rabbit hole or have made a conscious decision not to use social media opportunities. Then at least understand that is having an impact on your business. Why, as my first line in this paragraph suggests social media is all about building new style relationships. Out of respect for the many sign and print companies I work with I cannot prudently share some of the

amazingly simple work these companies are doing to promote their business via social media.

They promote and build a relationship with the customers by simple photograph of a job that they have completed then posted on let's say Instagram®. It's not just the forward-thinking sign and print guys who are setting an example.

Recently we witnessed regional shutdowns, one excellent example I saw was a small coastal Police Station whose officer in charge had engaged in a proactive manner with locals and visitors to educate their 'marketplace' as to their obligations and conditions of travel while the shutdown was on. Ask yourself – would you have seen that happen in years gone by? It is now a widely used protocol in most institutions who have adapted to a more agile and intelligent way of connecting with their widely ranging demographic. Let me give full credit to Ulladulla Police station's proactive team and I assume many other service institutions in these trying times who are connecting with the locals and visitors alike, well done!

4. Time to assess – Open your eyes and ears.

There is an age old saying you have two eyes and two ears, while you only have one mouth. The prudent person uses them in the correct proportion. If you're truly going to think differently you need to allow yourself time to assess and listen. Look at other examples of change you can adapt. It's impossible with a limit of about 1800 words to offer you an ironclad solution. However, the very fact that you're reading this article would indicate to me that your mind is open to possibly two of the most difficult things for a human to achieve and that is thinking differently and change!

Proof is in the reading – Check out in this issue – Visual Impact Virtual Tradeshow or online at <http://www.visualimpact.org.au/sign-print-graphics-virtual-tradeshow> – The short story is the team at Visual Connection and our team at ControlZone Online had a problem – No gatherings of people – no exhibitions. It is people who solve problems by Thinking Differently. We built an online tradeshow – day one 1,630 visitors and within a couple of weeks close to 10,000 visitors ... Think and grow is the name of the game.

We are offering a free one-hour introductory consultancy in our office in Pyrmont or via ZOOM to discuss your ideas regarding how to think differently. Please email me on john@controlzone.com.au with "Think Differently" in the subject line for a return email to set up an appointment.