

## PLANNING FOR THE RECOVERY

By Mary Sullivan

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Pundits and economists agree: The recession has bottomed out. That's about where the agreement ends. Not all segments of the economy are showing signs of recovery yet (employment always lags in a recovery), and everyone has questions about what kind of recovery it will be.

Make no mistake: The prospect of a return to normalcy — or possibly to a “new normal” — represents *opportunities*. Rather than resuming what you did before, it's a perfect time to [reevaluate your programs](#) and institute changes that will keep you ahead of the competition as these opportunities open up. Don't wait too long to get moving, or you risk watching your more fleet-footed competition pass you by.

### **Build Momentum**

To get going, combine the new reality of customer communication and engagement with the lessons the recession has taught us all about frugality. Here are five critical areas that need the attention of your marketing and sales team as we enter the recovery:

***Maintain tight control over costs***, especially until you have seen multiple back-to-back profitable quarters.

- ★ You're ready to start growing again, but until you can staff up to your pre-recession headcount, use consultants for strategic projects, contractors and even interns for tactical ones. This may sound self-serving coming from a consultant, but I have run marketing groups before and speak from that perspective here.
- ★ Expand your exposure on a modest budget. Integrate social media into your marketing communications, using updates and tweets to draw visitors to your web-based [content](#), housed on your own site. Cost? Only your time to manage the program.

***Increase productivity***. Approaches to achieving higher productivity can include organizational change, process changes and technology enhancements.

- ★ Use [marketing automation tools](#) that integrate with your sales force automation system. Take advantage of their capabilities to nurture prospects until they turn into leads.
- ★ Consider an internal wiki for sales and marketing to share information, including competitive intelligence.
- ★ Streamline your order process in ways that will make sales operations more productive.

***Keep the customers you have***. It costs considerably more to attract a new customer than it does to retain an existing one.

- ★ Monitor what people are saying about your company on blogs and social networks. Here's one place where an intern could help. Be prepared to respond quickly and positively if a negative vibe is out on the Internet.
- ★ Test the pulse of your best customers and find out if they're as satisfied as you imagine they are. Hold a [Customer Advisory Board](#) (CAB) meeting. A consultant can help by moderating these conversations. Arrange product marketer meetings with key customers. Be sure to share relevant findings with all functions within your business – from sales, to operations, to customer service.

**Improve your close ratio.** While it is great to get more leads, and you'll want to be doing that, a very cost-effective way to increase sales can be to turn a higher percentage of prospects into buyers.

- ★ Clearly define your [lead qualification process](#), end to end, if you haven't already, and nurture interested prospects until they are ready to buy. Sales teams that don't waste time on unqualified opportunities close more deals.
- ★ Make sure your reps are talking to the right decision-maker. Focus on reaching the right level, and watch your close ratio improve.

**Shorten the sales cycle.** There are both financial and competitive costs associated with a lengthy sales cycle, and shortening the cycle reduces those costs.

- ★ Discover what kinds of sales tools will help your reps close deals faster. [ROI tools](#) are especially valuable now while customers are highly cost-conscious. Competitive comparisons based on good intelligence also help close sales. Ask your reps what else would help shorten the sales cycle.
- ★ Can you up-sell, upgrade, or renew customers online? If it will shorten the sales cycle and increase revenue, consider a pilot project to see if it is effective.

**The “new normal?”** Yes, be prepared to think differently. Be more customer-focused than ever before. Be prepared to [engage prospects and customers actively](#) in your marketing plans – from every angle. Be prepared to let customers control the communications environment now. They will, anyway!

### **About the Author**

*Mary Sullivan, co-founder of KickStart Alliance, delivers customer-focused product marketing to clients in a variety of technology sectors, including clean tech. Mary is an experienced social media user and community builder: a long-time [blogger](#), LinkedIn member, Facebook user and active [Twitterer](#). Want help planning your content marketing approach? [Contact Mary](#).*