

What Zenyatta teaches us about winning.

This past Saturday we witnessed a highlight of the racing season, the Breeders' Cup Classic. This year we had the added drama of watching a 6 year old filly, Zenyatta, try to become the first American-bred horse to win 20 consecutive races and retire undefeated. Zenyatta had a chance to accomplish both feats with a second straight victory in the Breeders' Cup Classic. Like last year she was the only female in a field of 12. This filly has a unique way of racing: she habitually starts in last place, surveys the field, assesses conditions, scopes out her competition, watches for an opening, and then comes from behind to win. I'm not advocating that we should start slowly in our businesses, but there are some interesting lessons to be learned by watching this talented pony execute her strategy.

On November 2, The Presidents Forum hosted a breakfast for area business owners with two speakers sharing their stories on "How to Manage your Business in Turbulent Times". Like Zenyatta, our breakfast speakers have their own unique prescription for success.

The first speaker, Tom Miskewitz, President of Champion Container Corporation and a Forum member advised us to: ***know your competitors, look for opportunities and invest in the future***. In explaining his success Tom related that last year he was surprised when his competitors eliminated part of their sales staff. Tom felt this was the time to build up his sales initiative not reduce it. He reminded us of the things that drive sales - it's the salesperson and the relationships they develop that are critically important. Miskewitz also told us he saw an opening to invest a sizable amount of money to bring solar energy to both his NJ warehouses. This project yielded a favorable ROI that will yield long-term benefits to his organization. When asked by a participant if it was hard to invest a large sum in these uncertain times, Tom replied that when the opportunity is necessary for the long term health of the business, we need to invest.

The second speaker, Veronica Fielding, President of Digital Brand Expressions, suggested we ***keep track of progress and stay on top of marketing***. Veronica shared a timeline of her business for the last three years and highlighted the point where she realized her company began feeling the effects of the recession. That point was when Fielding received several phone calls from customers alerting her that they would be cutting back at the start of 2009. She assessed the conditions and spoke honestly with her team about her strategy to get back in the race. She also pulled through the slump and is today seeing the benefits of her action plan.

Both Tom and Veronica feel now is the time to survey the field and look for openings. Tom invested in his sales team and spent hours talking with them about their clients, the suppliers and the competitive environment. Veronica spoke with her staff to make necessary changes and improvements. Both were wonderfully opportunistic, just like

Zenyatta, and saw openings where others might see nothing but dismal recession, a crowded field and other roadblocks.

More than ever, we need to hit the ground running, pound the pavement and exhibit persistence to stay in the race. In her final race Zenyatta lost by a nose, finishing her career at 19 wins, 1 loss. Like Zenyatta, we are in a tough competitive field. The better prepared, better trained and better devoted we are, the greater our chances of winning the race. Zenyatta was not good at running on a dirt track but, this last weekend, still finished in the money and almost won. We may not like the current conditions but great business leaders win no matter what the economic climate.

Steve McCarthy