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How to Expand Your Vision

By Dr. Kathleen Begley
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Note to Readers: *This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley recently launched a new blog called "Meandering to a Different Drummer." Click onto the website address at the end of this article to read her one-paragraph musings on life, death, and how to keep a neat wallet.*

During the past few weeks, I have received at least 1,000 emails from companies advertising Christmas goodies. The subject lines obviously were intended to whip me into a buying frenzy. "Last Chance – Warehouse Clearance!" "Five Days Only; Take 20 Percent Off Your Order!" "Style Essentials: Wonderful Clothes for Less!" "Twelve Deals of Christmas!" "\$30 Off and Free Shipping!" I hadn't seen so many exclamation points since studying punctuation way back in elementary school.

One of the simpler subject lines caught and kept my attention. It said only "Gifts for Unique People." The reason for my interest was not the text but the sender: none other than the august New York Times. To learn about national and international events, I happen to be a huge fan of that particular newspaper. Famous for more than a century for its commitment to providing all the news that's fit to print, the Times long has been considered the paper of record in the United States. But Times, they are a changing.

The newspaper's email to me was not hawking subscriptions, but pushing a panoply of holiday presents with little apparent connection to journalism. For \$895, I could buy my family, friends, or business associates a fully assembled wooden model of the H.M.S. Victory; for \$174.99, a golf watch and ball set in a collectible tin; for \$90 a six-bottle sampler of wine; for \$69.95 a touch screen Sudoku puzzle with case; for \$59.99 a Lafayette pendant; and for \$24.95 a book titled "Obama: The Historic Journey." But why on earth was the New York Times turning into Gifts R Us? Money, pure and simple.

The Times, like most newspapers in the United States, is in financial trouble. During the past year, readership at the nation's dailies have fallen anywhere from 5 to 25 percent. According to numerous studies, most people under age 40 find out what's going on not by picking up a newspaper, but by tapping into an electronic website such as www.huffingtonpost.com or www.politico.com. So what is a legend like the New York Times supposed to do? Leverage its existing resources and get into other businesses, by holiday indications. Besides selling products, the Times also has started an online university and holds face-to-face classes in its new building on 8th Avenue in Manhattan.

The newspaper's approach to shifting economic realities strikes me as a valuable role model for you and me. During good times, most savvy entrepreneurs and corporate executives got into the habit of focusing on small niches, rather than trying to be all things to all people. The strategy commonly was called "sticking to your knitting." I suggest that this rotten economy calls for doing the exact opposite: broadening career perceptions. Instead of defining yourself as a tax accountant, for instance, you may want to reposition yourself as a financial counselor. As such, you could write a book about overcoming fear of the Internal Revenue Service. Or sell stress balls and spa treatments in the months preceding April 15. Or stage seminars on building up deductions at the end of every year.

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My advice: whatever it takes to make an honest buck, do it. Now is not the time to stick stubbornly to an obsolete self-image. Purist, schmurist. Here are some tips about tapping as individuals into the New York Times' about-face approach to survival:

Think technology. The training business, which I've been in for about 15 years, traditionally conducted workshops almost exclusively in classroom settings. Typically, participants spent several days in face-to-face contact with others enrolled in the program. Today, seminar companies offer webinars, podcasts and other educational outreaches over the Internet. Participants supposedly can soak up the knowledge without ever living their cubicles. Almost every day, I get invited to such an event powered by a technology-savvy speaker.

Sell giveaways. Yes, I know this advice sounds contradictory. But you may want to rethink handing out free logo-embossed items such as golf shirts and gym bags. Instead, start charging for them. Take your lead from big-name entertainers, who always have their CD's and other paraphernalia on sale in the lobby, and Disney World, which is packed with stores selling Mickey Mouse and The Little Mermaid items. When singer Taylor Swift performs in March at the Wachovia Center in Philadelphia, I guarantee that she won't be throwing free T-shirts into the audience. Ditto on the characters portraying Donald Duck and Snow White frolicking about in the Happy Kingdom.

Package your knowledge. I suspect you know more than you think you do. Make money with that information. If you're in the construction industry, for instance, create manuals and seminars for rabid do-it-yourselfers.

Stretch the concept. Say you own a service station. Until now, you've made a decent living changing oil filters and adding brake linings. How about getting into \$100-per-car detailing, a low-investment add-on requiring little more on your part than soap, water, and elbow grease?

Expand your market. If I owned a beauty salon, I'd offer package-deal appointments for brides and bridesmaids, new mothers and babies, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, best friends forever. You get the idea. The more the merrier, as far as profitability is concerned. You may want to join forces with a photographer, who could take pictures of the people looking their best after you work your magic.

Look for partners. Let's say you're employed at a company producing bath products for infants. Why not approach a pre-school chain about giving big-sister and big-brother classes for children of pregnant mothers? Surely, you can work your relaxing lavender-scented baby lotion into the curriculum.

Put on rose-colored glasses. When the real estate industry tanked a few years ago, many agents wrung their hands and eventually closed up shop. But a visionary few dug in for the long haul. One solution to declining sales has been charging sellers for advice on making homes more attractive to potential buyers. The process is called staging, and it has become a thriving sideline industry. That reminds me. A friend of mine just bought her first house. Do you think, as a housewarming gift, she might enjoy a fully assembled wooden model of the H.M.S. Victory?

Dr. Kathleen Begley has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody.