



CASE STUDY

◆ By PAULETTE THOMAS ◆

Classified Ad Firm Takes Off the Gloves

THE PROBLEM: A mellow, family-owned firm has no experience clawing its way out of the economic trough.

No business is a better economic bellwether than help-wanted advertising. So Bell Advertising Service in Pittsburgh might have anticipated the current slowdown. Since the late 1970s, Bell has handled chores around help-wanted ads for clients across the country, designing the ads, placing them in newspapers and job boards.

But Controller Diana Hartman, the daughter of the founder, and Linda Weinzetl, chief executive, on staff for more than 20 years, hardly looked up from their desks to notice how bad things were getting. Softspoken, hard-working women, they sprinted through the '90s boom, without a plan for a slowdown. At their peak, they had 20 employees.

In 2000, America began its layoff binge, cutting job advertising. And job boards, such as Monster.com, siphoned off work. Every Friday afternoon, they'd gather in Ms. Weinzetl's office to look at the numbers. "We'd say, wow, this is bad, but at least it can't get any worse than this," says Ms. Weinzetl. "And then the next week would be worse, and the week after."

THE SOLUTION: They had to re-evaluate their approach from the ground up.

They signed on with PowerLink, an organization that forms panels of advisers for women-owned businesses. The panel's first question: Who are your clients? The pair had never examined their client base in detail, figuring they gave every one the same high level of service.

But on closer examination, they found that most were big national manufacturers, many doing government work. These clients, they realize, care about documenting how much business they do with women or minority-owned firms. So the Bell women undertook the arduous process of becoming a certified women-owned business, compiling a notebook several inches thick. Already big clients have taken note.

They looked hard at costs, letting attrition shrink the ranks, and renegotiated their downtown office lease. They cut salaries—including their own—and benefits, without imposing layoffs.

Most importantly, perhaps, they let go of their overly mannerly image of themselves. They took pride, over the years, in not being "hard sell," to avoid pestering their clients—which meant that they were barely selling.

Now everyone sells. Graphic artists and ad composers call current clients and follow leads for new ones. They used their own help-wanted data to launch a weekly e-newsletter. The new, tougher Bell is a work in progress, but they are finally past break-even again. Each of the past six weeks have shown an uptick in their ads and revenue. It augers well for the economy—and for Bell.

THE LESSON: A downturn is the perfect opportunity to retool your business, top to bottom.