

## *Fireman's Lament*



We call it fire extinguisher management - dashing from one flare up to another trying to make sure everything doesn't go up in flames.

You scramble to flush out new business leads, hit client deadlines just under the wire, do things yourself because it's quicker than showing someone how to do them your way. You know the drill.

And so one year slides into the next leaving that disquieting feeling that you're just not getting where you want to go. Tell the truth now: have you accomplished all you wanted this year?

The solution is simple but not easy. You need a timeout and I don't mean just a few days off around the holidays. You need to step back, take a breath, get some perspective. And then come up with a way that's going to work to achieve your goals.

The process is actually a snap. Here are the pieces: lead a directed conversation with your best thinkers for a day or two (off-site is best) that starts with a snapshot of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; define your agency's key success factors; establish no more than five or six strategic imperatives for '05; craft an ironclad action plan anchored by individual accountability and deadlines covering people issues, operations, marketing plans, financial milestones, and personal growth goals; set immutable dates for quarterly progress reviews; and - this is important - establish and enforce inviolable consequences for meeting or missing objectives.

That in a nutshell, folks, is a strategic planning action agenda with teeth (the consequences part). So why can't more agencies do it?

Couple of reasons. First, it's a little like a doctor performing self-surgery - the knowledge is there but operating on yourself is usually painful and always messy. Lots of agencies hold "planning meetings" which net little more than confusion, increased frustration, and more same-old same-old.

Another reason is a phenomenon called "goal distraction." Example: you chase after a fat piece of business for months ("If we get this new account it will fix everything!") but in the process take your eye off the ball running and growing the accounts already in-house. You will pay a price for that inattention later on, believe me.

Here's another common goal distraction. You spend thousands trying to find that one extraordinary staffer, maybe shell out a stiff headhunter's fee, but meantime completely ignore essential skill development which would have enormous positive effect (account leadership training, presentation skills, strategic thinking) because "we don't have the budget for that." You've fixated on hitting a particular target but ignored the essential ingredients of success.

Besides goal obsession, there's yet another reason that homemade strategic planning often fails. Many agency leaders try too hard to be all things to all people, including acting as doting father figures to their staff "children" because their need to be liked is greater than their need to succeed, no matter their protests to the contrary. But that's a subject for another newsletter.

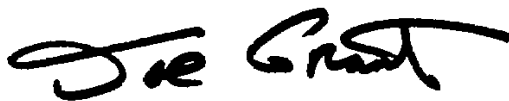
So a few months after you meet to put your plan together it begins to fall apart and it's back to business as usual - flailing at the flare-ups, and trying not to hear the little voice in your head chanting Thoreau's chilling admonition, "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation..."

Let's be clear. If you launch into next year merely hoping for better results without a new way to get the important things done, come December '05 you'll be right where you are now. Something has to change.

A consequence-laced strategic plan is as magical as punching a destination into your car's GPS and following the turn-by-turn directions. You'll get where you want to go.

We have a proprietary action-planning process specially designed for agencies. Instead of constantly grabbing the fire extinguisher, it's like using a baton to orchestrate and lead your company so you get the results you want. Give me a call and we'll talk about your issues and how we work.

That is, if you want to spend less time carrying around that damn fire extinguisher next year.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joe Grant". The signature is stylized and cursive, with the first letters of "Joe" and "Grant" being larger and more prominent.