By Amy Bingham

Most of us entered the New Year with a sense of cautious optimism. After all, what could be worse than the storms we faced in 2008 with stocks plummeting, our retirement accounts eroding and the companies we service laying off in droves? The impact hit many of us close to home as we watched good people lose their jobs …

… and maybe we were even among those filing first-time unemployment claims. The recession has forced many companies to create operational efficiencies by taking painful actions that for some may have been long overdue. Those who executed well now find themselves in the fortunate position of being able to invest – opening new offices and hiring additional sales talent. These companies will be set up to fare better over the next year and beyond than their peers who continue to pull back, closing offices, exiting markets, and reducing sales and marketing budgets. The latter group may ultimately struggle to capitalize on the flurry of new business activity that accompanies economic recovery. Regardless of our approach, the expense reduction actions taken late last year to protect our profits from further deterioration this year were essential but not the magic bullet. So here we are in the last lap of a soft first quarter, and we're finding it's getting harder to see through those rose-colored glasses we donned in January. Expense management isn't enough; we know we have to grow despite today's economic challenges. It's easy to be successful when times are good, but the real test of performance is the ability to achieve results

Business Still Tough?

Make a New Prospect List

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when the cards are stacked against us. So if your top line is weaker than expected, it's time to make course corrections in your sales strategy. Before you assume your sales reps are sub-par, take a hard look at the doors they're knocking on.

Here's the good news. No one knows with certainty when the upturn will occur, but the staffing industry has a reliable tool to predict what will happen when it does. The GDP growth trend is expected to be negative for at least another couple of quarters into 2009, and our business likely won't improve much in the short run. But while we're painfully aware that what goes up eventually comes down, we can take comfort in the knowledge that the reverse is also true – as is evidenced by the chart depicting how the temporary sector help follows GDP growth in and out of economic downturns over the years (see chart on p. 64). This historical data gives us confidence that when the GDP trend begins to improve, our clients – under pressure to meet increasing demand but cautious about investing in full-time headcount – will quickly place orders for temps. And as recovery is sustained, direct hire orders will follow.

So while we await the inevitable prosperity that accompanies an economic upturn, we must focus every sales resource on those in the best position to buy right now. How do we up our chances of success by targeting companies with the highest probability to close? The answer is simple but profound. Go where the growth is. Find the industries growing and target them aggressively. This may mean entrance into verticals and disciplines you historically have not targeted. It may mean creating new service offerings designed to appeal to a specific industry. But one thing is certain. If ever there was a time to work smart, it's now.

Here are some tips for shoring up your target list, reducing the sales cycle and maximizing revenue potential.

Devote a few hours to Internet research. There are several Websites available that provide a plethora of data. The most obvious are the Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov) and the Bureau of Economic Analysis (www.bea.gov). But Google "recession-resistant industries" and you'll quickly locate other sources – such as Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) and HR World (www.hrworld.com), which recently published the "Top 25 Careers to Pursue in a Recession." Identify growing industries and verticals using the following criteria as a guide:

- Those growing despite the current economic climate
- Those growing as a result of the current economic state
- Those most recession-resistant
- Those with skills in high demand that you can fill
- Those with the greatest presence in your market (unless your office services the nation, focus on the geography closest to your location)

Look for correlations between the skills in highest demand nationally, in

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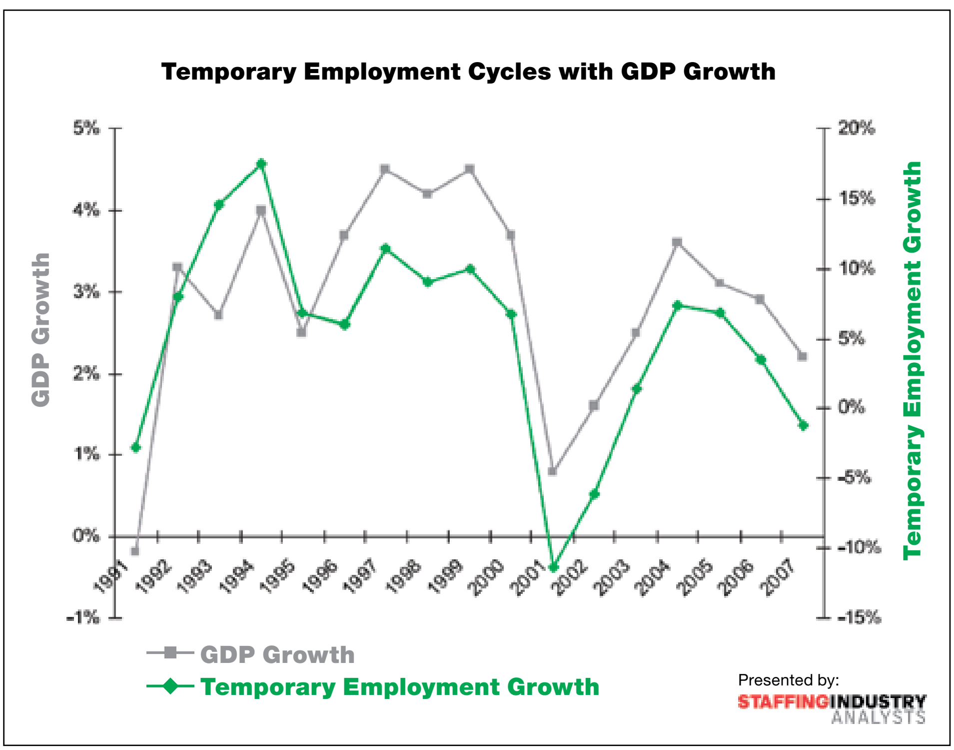
your market, and then in your firm's ability to fill them. Also, don't overlook blogs on employment-focused Websites, which can be a good resource for anecdotal information and leads. The education you'll acquire out of this research will be well worth the time and effort you invest.

Use your logic. What do consumers need regardless of or as a result of a change in economic conditions? Topping the list as generally recession-resistant are healthcare (particularly preventative health and wellness as the population ages), government and education. People still need healthcare, governmental issues increase in importance, and the need and desire to learn new skills grows in a down economy. These are the more obvious, and some staffing firms have already built aggressive marketing strategies designed to target them. Less obvious but also logical is environmental science. The "go green" movement and the importance of combating global warming will continue to prompt investments in technologies supporting these initiatives, so companies associated with these efforts are growing. Food-related industries and suppliers may also be doing well. Grocery stores flourish as people eat fewer mealsout in a down economy. While upscale retail stores are taking a hit, their peer group in the discounting space is seeing an uptick in business as consumers place a higher value on price.

Don't be too quick to disqualify an industry that may have been negatively impacted by the downturn. For example, you may assume the financial crisis means banks should come off your target list. But if their layoffs have been severe enough to warrant the use of contractors, their call centers may be exceptionally busy with inquiries from concerned customers. Acquisitions and consolidations currently prevalent in this industry will require new skills, whether contract or full-time. Mortgage firms will be busier as declining interest rates fuel refinancing. Just be sure to check the company's credit rating before it lands on your target list!

Similarly, financial advisors, insurance companies and law firms in your market may be realizing a windfall of business as a result of the same crisis. Seek out contacts in those businesses at networking events for advice. Industry insiders are in the best position to confirm whether or not they're experiencing growth as a result of the downturn and whether it's worth your time to knock on their doors right now.

Lastly, persevere. We can't control the economic environment, but we can control our behavior in response to it. Don't allow discouragement to paralyze you while you wait for the landscape to improve. Heed this advice from the great philosopher, Earl Nightingale, who grew up during The Great Depression and knew firsthand how to weather the storms of economic turbulence: "Don't let the fear of the time it will take to accomplish something stand in the way of your doing it. The time will pass anyway; we might just as well put that passing time to the best possible use." Keep tweaking the formula until you find one that works. SI



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