

## Delightful But Disastrous Distractions

Recently while I was mailing business packages at the post office, I was pleased to see the various posters by local school children on display. They kept my interest and attention while I waited. I was especially pleased when the mother of a crying baby distracted the child by showing him the various multicolored pictures. The posters quieted the child. His eyes moved from color to color, wild design to bold strokes. And as I saw his eyes wildly roving and keeping him distracted from the lengthy wait, I contemplated how a similar phenomenon happens to business people.

We are focused, and sometimes driven, to accomplish certain goals. We want to make this year better than last. We have a number of profit benchmarks in mind. Sometimes we even write them down and share them with our employees and associates.

Then it happens. We see our competitor's new advertising campaign . . . we notice that another competitor is changing pricing . . . our employees are interested in developing new products in response to a single special request by a marginally profitable customer. All of these things and others that you can list are distractions. They appear to be issues of high importance at the moment, but they are really diversions that will lead us down a dead-end path if we follow them. As the distractions take our eyes off our original goals, we risk wandering from our path of success.

How can we say that monitoring the competition isn't important? How can we ignore meeting the needs of the customers that clamor for new products? How can we be insensitive to changes in market pricing?

The secret is to put them into perspective—and that is sometimes easier said than done. When we are distracted by the actions of others, we take our resources and energy and move into a reactive posture when we should be implementing our proactive plan.

How do business leaders develop the discipline to derail these delicious and attractive distractions? The solution is found in the commitment we make to achieving our long-term goals and understanding that planning is not a process that happens during a 30-day period in the fourth quarter. It is an on-going discipline. Successful business people factor into their plan without discarding the well-thought-out strategies that are a written part of the plan. Competitive distractions become new information that is monitored, not reacted to. By following a disciplined approach, successful companies are able to adapt their plans without getting derailed by distractions.

*By Richard Delaney*