

Our next wave of entrepreneurs

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Marie Najjar is the sort of person who likes to make sure her Ts are crossed and her Is are dotted.

So when she started her public relations business two years ago, Najjar wrote her own job description, a company manual and review process even though she was at that time working from home and had no staff.

She also factored into her business plan the possibility of an economic downturn, as she could see the writing on the wall even back then.

"I wasn't afraid to go out on my own. I went into this thinking that if I could deliver what I was already delivering, I would attract clients," Najjar says.

"From the very beginning I had the big picture in my mind and I stuck to that vision."

Najjar funded her business, Public City, by herself and says although things have slowed with the global financial crisis, her business is still growing.

"Most of my leads have come through word of mouth and we had a plan that could see us through times like this," she says.

"All the economy has done has meant we have had to implement things a little more quickly. I have some friends who are starting new businesses and they have come to me for advice. I tell them the best thing to do is to work out what your mission is and what your values are and stick to them.

"And if you bring people into the business make sure they share those ideals, because the best way to grow a business is to get your brand out there without having to spend a lot on advertising. And the best form of advertising is word of mouth."

Despite news that Australia is in recession and many established businesses are reporting they will be cutting staff, there are many companies just starting up and others, like Najjar's, that continue to expand.

David Baumgarten, who runs the Business Enterprise Centre (BEC) in Sydney's eastern suburbs, says the centre and its city-based office has been busier than ever with requests for information and advice on starting new businesses.

"There are a lot of people out there with redundancy payments that are looking into things like franchises or internet-based businesses," Baumgarten says.

"Then there's those people whose superannuation has lost its value and they realise they have to work longer but cannot get back into the workforce so they are creating their own jobs by starting their own businesses."

The executive officer of Sutherland Shire's BEC, Maria Cook, says southern Sydney is experiencing the same phenomena with an influx of inquiries about starting up a small business.

A survey by Sutherland BEC shows that of the more than 260 people who have responded, more than half are positive their new businesses will survive the recession.

"The survey has also found that only a very small percentage of people who did come in for advice decided against starting a new business in the current economic climate," Cook says.

"This is the sort of climate in which people want to create their own jobs and we are getting many older workers with corporate backgrounds reinventing themselves as consultants."

But Baumgarten says that "although the fundamentals of business have not changed, the landscape has".

"Businesses, even small businesses, have to work in the global market, as well as servicing their local market," he says. "And to do that they have to know how technology and global communication works."

With many new businesses based around technology such as the internet, Baumgarten and Cook agree people need to be technologically savvy to showcase their brand and be noticed by potential clients.

Using social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter is cost-effective and impact-effective, says Cook, as are professional social networking sites such as LinkedIn.

"Using these sorts of sites and technology means that businesses can control what is put out there," Cook says. "Recommendations from others are still probably the best form of advertising you can have, though."

The managing director of Z-Card marketing company, Rodney Serhan, says in the tough economic times businesses need to be smarter and more targeted with their marketing approach.

"Gone are the days of mass marketing; it now needs to be more specific and targeted to show results and businesses need to work smarter, not harder, in their advertising approach," Serhan says.

"For too long advertisers have focused on the big players with the big budgets and they are realising that there are a lot more small and medium enterprises out there like myself who need cost-effective and innovative advertising ideas."

Serhan says technological tools such as Prospector, which can alert businesses about when a company is expanding or launching a new product or campaign, can help businesses plan their own sales pitches to relevant clients. "Of course, you can find out that sort of information by sifting through all the newspapers and advertising publications but if you could get that information more quickly it can help immensely," he says.

"It's a much more effective approach to go head-on with pitching ideas than waiting until something has already happened."

The head of client services for De Pasquale Advertising, Dan Adler, says companies have mostly gone for a straightforward, safe approach to their marketing when times are good but in a less certain economic climate, that does not always work.

"Clients may have to go down a path less well-travelled and invent stuff that hasn't been done before," Adler says.

"We advise our clients that their brands have to be very clear and there are a lot of non-traditional ways to do that on a shoestring budget.

"You can deliver some fantastic results on a very small budget. For example, our company traditionally sends out Christmas cards and this year we went with the theme Big Ideas, Small Budget. Instead of big Christmas cards we sent out cards the size of a postage stamp, which got the message across perfectly.

"Small to medium enterprises can get great resonance with little expenditure if they think a bit differently and use technology and platforms that are already out there."

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/small-business/our-next-wave-of-entrepreneurs-20090619-cr14.html>