In the current economic climate, there is no denying that we are all feeling the heat—leisure travel is down and loan rejections are up. While the challenges are great, our resilience is even greater. There are signs, even now, that the industry can and will bounce back, but in the meantime, how do we keep from getting burned?

When times get tough, the natural response is to focus on the bottom line. Budget constraints and restructuring directs much of our focus inward on our staff, keeping morale up and creating new processes to manage workloads with fewer employees. There is no doubt that this is a necessary and beneficial use of resources. All too often, however, this means that the most crucial element of a successful business—the customer—gets lost in the shuffle. Maintaining an efficient housekeeping schedule is always important but less so if all of those clean rooms are sitting empty.

In a 2008 article called, “Marketing Your Way through a Recession,” Harvard Business School Professor John Quelch gives the following advice:

“Research the customer. Instead of cutting the market research budget, you need to know more than ever how consumers are redefining value and responding to the recession. Price elasticity curves are changing. Consumers take more time… and negotiate harder at the point of sale. They are more willing to postpone purchases, trade down, or buy less. Must-have features of yesterday are today’s can-live-withouts. Trusted brands are especially valued, and they can still launch new products successfully, but interest in new brands and new categories fades. Conspicuous consumption becomes less prevalent.”

So, how well are you keeping in touch with your owners, guests, and prospects? Do you know the difference between their “must-haves” and their “can-live-withouts”? How are they measuring their experience at your resort? This goes well beyond simply reviewing the results of comment card scores. You need to understand why they are rating their experiences as they do, and how you can sustain confidence in your products and services as we work through this difficult time. People are still buying, but their reasons for buying (and not buying) are changing. You need to do more than hear the “voice of the customer,” you need to understand the “heart of the customer.”

Quality Assurance (QA) is one of the best arrows you can have in your quiver. Knowing what drives your owners, guests, and prospects is paramount in helping you sustain your success and build for the future. Now is the perfect time to audit your QA processes.

Here are some tips to consider:

• Talk to your customers, or solicit third party assistance to make sure you are in touch with your customers’ needs. Find out what they like and what they don’t. This can be accomplished through focus groups, post-visit surveys, or on-site intercept interviews.

• Audit your employee customer service performance. This can be done through your internal processes, by employing “mystery shoppers”, or by conducting an in-depth service/facilities audit.

• Consider creating an internal QA employee team. Enlist your employees’ help in setting standards; encourage them to take ownership of these standards and to help manage them.

• Consider soliciting insights from your Board of Directors. How do they measure your performance? Conducting an audit of your board members can provide a fresh perspective.

• Get feedback from your prospects. Understand their fears, concerns, hesitations, and motivations about your products. To what degree are they still interested in the product even though they might not make a same-day purchase?

• Celebrate your employees who are creating an exceptional customer experience. Let them lead by example.

• Tell your positive customer stories. Publish your successes for others to read. Be a leader by example.

Now, more than ever, is a time for us to be consciously focused on consumer-centric service and sales. We simply cannot afford to neglect this aspect of our business—otherwise we run the risk of negatively impacting our bottom line not only today but also well into the future. It may be cliché, but it’s true: a happy customer will share her experience with three others, an unhappy customer will spread her dissatisfaction to ten.

What are your customers saying about you?

Ann Barker, RRP, is president and Chad J. Barker vice president of Barker & Associates. Their respective e-mails are annbarker@barkerandassociates.net and chadbarker@barkerandassociates.net.

Endnote