



A Look to the Future

It feels like it was just yesterday that I was evoking Mike Damone from the movie, "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" in my MRA presidential inauguration speech last June. The ensuing months have been a whirlwind of activity for both myself professionally, and for our Association. It's hard to believe that when you read this, my term as president will be in its final three month home stretch. In previous columns I've intimated disappointment that one term as president is in many ways shaped by the realities of the time in which you serve. Of course so much of any volunteer's contributions to an association happen along a lengthy and convoluted path. When I move into the past president's role in a few months, I will not only reflect on this past year, but on the many years of service on various committees, councils, work groups and task forces that preceded it, and in several ways, the priorities that have now become a part of our Association's strategic direction. But this month's column is not a retrospective, nor is it a time to lament. I've always tried to be someone with both feet in the present, and my eyes looking towards the future. So, with that in mind, I take this opportunity to look ahead at those priorities that I want all of us, both individually and as an Association to focus on over the next three months. Here's my short list:

1 Help us to Come out of Hibernation: I didn't order up a global recession during my term, and I'm certainly not going to advocate the complacency bordering on paralysis that I see around all too many colleagues and clients. At the risk of overstating this, I have to go back a good eight or more years to recall

such pervasive negativity in people's outlook. I'm a realist first and foremost, but I've grown weary of too many folks using the economy as a scapegoat for all that may be soft in our businesses. The tonality of coverage in our business media appears at an all time low. If the press isn't calling out blame on one individual or another organization, it is replete with tales of cathartic schadenfreude...an almost celebration of failure, and I for one am tired of it. It's quite easy to throw up one's hands, but I'm rejecting this notion.

In the last six months I've seen many companies in our profession embrace these challenges by investing in their future, taking a contrarian view and looking for growth and innovation. I've seen successful research firms leverage economic uncertainty to assert the value of what we do to help guide client organizations through the morass. It's been a cold Fall and Winter here in the Northeast, both climatologically and otherwise. By the time you read this, the birds will be back north and the baseball season will be underway. It's time for the negative Nellies out there to stop looking for excuses and get out and make things happen. Hibernation is over. To paraphrase Peter Sellers as Chauncey Gardner in another of my all time favorite movies, "Being There," "There will be flowers in the Spring!" It's up to us whether we want to plant them or watch someone else do it and live with the consequences.

2 Reinvigorate the Commitment to Research Quality: It's up to us to demonstrate the value that we bring to organizations. Just this morning I "lectured" a prospective client about the risks of do-it-yourself research

software. I recently blogged at Media Post in rebuttal to a marketer's column about how an easy way to create efficiencies in their organizations would be to turn to similar tools and "mother-in-law" samples or sales force conducted customer surveys to find efficiency without sacrificing the benefits of insights. Wake up people!! Your Association has created mechanisms like EEP, Professional Research Certification and the new Online Panel Audits to assure that we maintain a focus on quality research. But we are only as good as each member is in leveraging that in pitching their businesses and demonstrating what we bring to a project that Survey Monkey can't.

3 Shout our Preeminence from the Rooftops: Related to the above item, I want to see MRA and its members continue to assert our professionalism to everyone and anyone. I was pleased to see a recent issue of another leading trade magazine include a cover story lauding MRA for its work in keeping regulation at bay. Each of us can promote what we do locally, and we should. Speak at a conference, or in front of a school group. Write a letter to the editor or byline a piece. Go online and blog. Create a newsletter and send it to your clients. But recognize that in this soundbyte, A.D.D. society that we live in, perception is often assumed to be reality. We can help frame that perception.

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As a profession that has a better window into what society is thinking than any other, we are well positioned to do so.

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Take a Risk and Innovate:

If you look past the negative stories in the business press, you will find that some of the most innovative businesses and brands were created during a recession. I offer the I-Pod and CNN as two recent examples. At MRA, I'm pleased to see that a group of volunteers has mobilized to create a mechanism that strives to recognize and reward innovation. At the same time, our Business Services Work Group has completed their online Virtual

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Business Guide and is now focused on developing an enhanced MRA Career Services initiative that will help bring MRA employers and employees together, while simultaneously reinforcing the high standards that our Association stands for. Last month our board participated in a rigorous strategic planning exercise and considered sweeping recommendations of the MRA

Advisory Board that can keep our perspective fresh and moving forward.

Granted, this is an aggressive checklist.

The realist in me recognizes that many of these items will NEVER be finished. They will simply be refined over time.

But if there is an overarching take away from all of this, it is that each of you who have read this has a responsibility to yourself, your business and your profession to take ownership of both the short term and the long term. In last month's column on competition I noted that I'm never one to back down from something I believe in. If you are a member of MRA, I have to assume that you believe in the power of our profession. Let's collectively take ownership of it and not let ourselves be "victims" of someone else's definition of this moment in time.



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