

# RECESSION BUSTERS

*Century Autoline Inc. serves as a model for businesses in a slump*

By Ellen James Martin

**L**ife hasn't been easy lately for the sales force at Century Autoline Inc. The company sells lubricants used in trucks, industrial machinery and construction vehicles — including earthmoving equipment. And with the construction industry in the doldrums, the market has substantially weakened — especially for the upper-end products sold by Autoline.

"We're recession-sensitive," observes Edward J. Peres, president of the Baltimore-based company, a wholly owned subsidiary of Century Oils Group PLC, a British firm.

"Everybody is chasing a smaller piece of the pie," says Mr. Peres, noting that as demand for commercial lubricants has decreased, competition has intensified.

Faced with these obstacles, the temptation for Autoline salespeople could be to lie back and wait out the slump. But Mr. Peres says Autoline has done just the opposite, attempting to turn the recession into a positive.

"We've gone on the offensive and have just hired two new salespeople. We're expanding — making an investment in the future rather than clipping our wings and hiding," he says.

Sales mavens such as Vincent L. Zirpoli, president of Timonium-based Mega Marketing Inc., say Autoline is taking the right approach. Rather than retreating, the company is making more calls and focusing its sales presentation more sharply in the face of recession-oriented resistance.

"Reduce your expectations and that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy," Mr. Zirpoli says. "Instead of reducing your expectations, you have to increase your level of activity to achieve them," he says. During a recession, the smart salesperson uses the same basic techniques but uses those techniques in a more intense and focused manner, he says.

Think of the recession as if it were a steep incline on a highway, Mr. Zirpoli recommends. When you reach the incline, you have to step harder on the accelerator to keep up the same speed.

Sales specialists offer these pointers:

□ Focus on positive news about the economy.

You don't want to come off as a Pollyanna, but there's nothing wrong with passing on upbeat information, says Bob Bygate, Autoline's sales manager.

Mr. Bygate searches out successful construction developments in his clients' businesses. He then draws attention to the projects when he talks to others in the field, who are naturally curious about competitors and appreciate the news during the current construction industry doldrums.

"People are looking for positive support. You've got to help them look over the horizon," he says.

□ Make more calls to achieve the same rate of success.

"It's still a numbers game to a certain extent," Mr. Bygate says. A good salesperson is aware that a recession will affect what is known as his "closing ratio," or the number of attempts he makes vs. the number of actual sales.

While it could take five calls to achieve a sale in an average economy, or four in a booming economy, the same salesperson bearing the same product might have make six or seven presentations to achieve the same result in a weak economy, points out Mr. Zirpoli of Mega Marketing.

"You're going to have to be rejected more during a recession than a good economy," he says. "But you have to convince yourself that every 'no' puts you closer to a 'yes.'"

□ Use records to increase your sales efficiency.

Well-kept records of calls and other sales activity should help you stay focused on maintaining sales revenue in spite of the recession, Mr. Zirpoli says.

Keeping good call records will help you keep abreast of where your time is being spent, Mr. Zirpoli says. The idea is to become less random in your activity and more attentive to the follow-through, which is so important to achieving your goals. Keeping good records is important in all economies but becomes crucial in a recession, he says.

□ Make yourself more efficient by clustering cold calls.

When they work in a favorable economy, salespeople may become careless in scheduling their time, according to Mr. Bygate, who oversees a sales force of 26. But given the fact that they must increase their calls in a recession to keep up their results, they can't afford the luxury of careless scheduling, he points out.

While it would be foolish to postpone an important follow-up meeting with a prospect to save a few minutes, Mr. Bygate says there's no harm in clustering cold calls to new prospects on a geographic basis. It might be Columbia today, for instance, and Towson tomorrow. "You have to constantly look at your schedule and see where you're spending your time. Unless you're standing in front of someone, you're not selling," Mr. Bygate says.

□ Don't sell features, sell benefits.

In the old days of the hard sell, the salesperson would go to great lengths to tout a product's features. But contemporary selling, also known as "consultative selling" or "partnering," focuses less on the product's features in the abstract and more on the specific needs of the customer. Focusing on needs is especially important during an economic downturn, when customers tend to think more about a product's price than its long-term value.

"You have to relate a product's capability to a business need," says Dennis Chapman, president of a sales consulting group based in Ellicott City. To learn more about a company's needs, salespeople are tutored in the art of drawing out a prospect through questioning — listening intently while the prospect explains his priorities.

Autoline, for instance, often finds out through this process that its customers are interested in keeping their equipment for an extended period of time — an objective especially important during a recession when most can ill-afford to make capital investments, Mr. Bygate says. Autoline, therefore, emphasizes that its lubricants increase the life of its customers' vehicles.

Mr. Bygate observes, "It's more important than ever to emphasize value rather than price." **NBW**