Viewpoint

BY PAUL GODBOUT

WITH LOVE, FROM PARIS

What kind of florist goes to Paris to ride out the tail end of the recession, takes the co-owner with him and spends Valentine’s Day taking Web orders from the City of Love? The kind who has survived other economic downturns, was prepared for this one and knows that a different perspective can be just what you need. In other words, C’est moi!

I’m writing this from Paris, where my wife, Nancy, and I have been since January — as part of our master plan. (And shouldn’t every master plan include chocolates and romantic strolls?)

Of course this master plan includes way more than a trip across the pond. In Manchester, N.H., where our family’s business is in its 100th year, this recession began in 2006, when the number of customers started dropping. We had experienced the economic downturns of 1973 to 1974, 1979 to 1982, 1989 to 1992, and in 2001 and 2002. But this one felt different. We knew we needed to do more than adapt. We needed to make some serious changes. So we took five major courses of action.

First, we paid off the long-term debt on our main store by refinancing our home at 5.25 percent. And like so many, we began to eliminate as many recurring monthly expenses as we could. We closed our original flagship store in July 2008. The number of employees went from 37 full- and part-time in 2005 to 13. We now operate out of one 4,000-square-foot shop.

Second, we paid off all other mid-2009. We stopped filling all order gatherer-generated orders.

Third, we eliminated four vehicle leases by late out of one 4,000-square-foot shop. We eliminated four vehicle leases by mid-2009. We stopped filling all order gatherer-generated orders.

But we didn’t stop investing in the top line: We continued to spend at least 8 percent on advertising of total sales with a goal of 10 percent. And at the beginning of the year, we took two additional major actions: We joined Team Floral to leave no stone unturned in finding cost savings or marketing ideas and hired an advertising agency that has a lot of Internet savvy to oversee our $100,000-plus budget.

Business remains listless in 2010, but after a steady decline — a 37 percent drop from 2005 to 2009 — we believe we have stabilized, based on the fact that we hit our sales projections in both January and for Valentine’s Day.

Then we said Bon Voyage to get a broader outlook on business and our personal lives and rented an apartment in Paris from January to May. (Interestingly enough, our apartment sits above a full-service flower shop and is close to the intersection of Rue de Hyacinth.)

The long walks, holding hands, taking the metro and fast trains, sitting in cafes for daily wine, cheese and bread and visiting museums, galleries, and cathedrals have brought a new way of looking at the world, a different point of view. We have seen wonderful window displays of numerous products, new ideas, product innovation, and a very different culture and way of living.

Our children and our experienced team have been holding down the fort, and we check in with them regularly — all is well, but they look forward to our homecoming.

We will return in May refreshed and ready to implement some of what we have seen and will continue to see. The flower business has been good to us, and now to our children and even grandchildren. I can’t imagine a world without lots of flowers and plants. Yes, we will survive.

Paul Godbout is the owner, along with his wife, Nancy, of Jacques Flower shop in Manchester, N.H. E-mail: jacquesflowershop@gmail.com
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