

Goodbye, '09 (with mixed feelings)

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In our office, and no doubt throughout countless other small businesses across Houston, we are saying goodbye to 2009 with enthusiasm.

When I founded Pye Legal Group in 2006, I never imagined the chaos that 2009 would bring. In the last year, I juggled running a small business and fighting, and being cured of, Hodgkin's lymphoma. Not all companies could endure the challenges we faced in 2009, particularly after only three years of operation, but working smart has been the key to our success.

For any business, there are turning points that define success and failure, and they seldom present themselves at convenient times. Looking back, Hurricane Ike's powerful impact on Houston in late 2008 was a perfect metaphor for the effect the economic downturn would have nationwide in 2009. The lights went out — literally and figuratively. Not only did our city's business community struggle to get back online, but deals that we had on the front burner moved to the back burner and then subsequently disappeared. An evacuee from my own battered home for two weeks, I was staying with one of my dear friends and business associates when I was diagnosed with cancer. With multiple battles to fight, strategy, patience and flexibility became critical, both professionally and personally.

The lessons we learned this past year are ones that we will remember and apply in the best and worst of times. They include:

- Having a vision and sticking to it. Although it was daunting to go against the grain of what our competitors were doing, we remained committed to being a high-quality firm that provides top-level service. We learned that national competitors focused more on short-term metrics that resulted in downsizing and even closing their Houston offices. Instead, we trusted in our local connections and long-term relationships with our clients, knowing that their hiring needs would increase when the economy recovers. As a boutique firm, we increased our focus on personal service, strengthened our already deep ties to the local community and emphasized our capabilities and results to make it clear to clients that our business is in it for the long haul.
- Taking advantage of opportunities. As competitors significantly reduced marketing and advertising spending, we expanded our efforts, which strengthened our brand and gave us more visibility. Following the advice we gave our own clients to seize opportunities to hire talented employees during the economic downturn, we added two recruiters while other search firms trimmed personnel. We also capitalized on lower commercial real estate rates to upgrade our Dallas office space.
- Being nimble. We remained committed to our primary focus — placing lawyers in contract and permanent positions — but we expanded the scope of our legal recruiting services to encompass emerging areas where hiring demands were rising. We also were flexible in our marketing, altering our advertising and sponsorships to target particular audiences as demands shifted.
- Valuing teamwork. The vision I have always had for my company is to allow my colleagues to thrive and give them the resources to do so. The defining value for our firm culture is teamwork. Our collaborative approach means that we share information and ideas to produce the best results, which was never more important than in 2009. With a rapidly changing industry and an illness that demanded attention, I needed to have complete trust in my team's loyalty, integrity, and shared values. In the end, teamwork was the key to surviving this year.

Was 2009 a challenge? Of course. But we are stronger as a result. By sticking to our game plan, seizing opportunities, and coming together as a team, our firm ends a potentially devastating year on a bright note. The lessons we learned this year will define our business well beyond 2010.

Pye is president of Pye Legal Group, a Texas-based and certified women-owned legal search firm.

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