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• **Virgin Australia**

Just recently, in the space of a week, Air Australia collapsed and Virgin Australia reported a doubling of profit.

Air Australia, previously Strategic Airlines, had been serving corporate and government clients. With the loss of a significant defence contract, they rebranded and swung to the budget market. Meanwhile, Virgin had been pursuing a steady shift toward boosting corporate and government work.

Virgin's long-term strategy to cultivate a profitable market was a far better call than Strategic's.

• **DJ Builders**

A Brisbane company in the building sector has been meeting targets and growing all the way through the GFC and post-GFC slump.

This is no small feat in the residential building sector. They're doing this by keeping activity and intention as it was before the GFC, but adapting their rigour to marketing-effectiveness and by managing meetings more tightly.

• **Crimsafe**

The premium-end manufacturer of security screens could have suffered greatly from the GFC, but continues to expand its markets here and overseas.

There are plenty of competitors selling cheaper version of the product that may not perform anywhere near as well as Crimsafe's patented product. But Crimsafe does not move to competing on price.

Its television advertising, featuring Dick Smith, focuses on the absolute superiority of its product and its website talks in depth about the science behind this superiority. ■

## Stephen Johnson



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# How to keep clients and grow business in a downturn

Much of *Dr Greg Chapman's* excellent advice for bookkeepers can help other accounting technicians weather tough times, too.

With the storm clouds on the international economic horizon, it is difficult not to be at least a little pessimistic about the future for small businesses in Australia. The good news for bookkeepers – and most other accounting technicians – is that most business owners view them as an essential service.

Bookkeepers in particular are unlikely to lose their jobs/clients, unless their service is inadequate, or their client goes out of business in a downturn. While it might seem unlikely, if you are self-employed, there are also opportunities to grow your business even if a downturn eventuates.

However, the first priority is protecting what you have, so a review of your client satisfaction is timely. Ask your clients to give you feedback on how you are doing, and what improvements they can think of that you can implement. Often a bookkeeper is doing things of which the client is not even aware. I would not necessarily make a song and dance about it, but you might provide a short regular report of the activities that you have undertaken in your role. Have you looked at the maintenance report from your car mechanic? It lists everything.

Look for opportunities to add value. Would they like to see additional reports to better understand their business performance? Perhaps you could show them examples of the reports you could produce. It is common that a bookkeeper has clients operating at different levels of effectiveness. What ideas can you see working well in your top clients' businesses that could be transferred to your second-tier clients?

A bookkeeper has many insights on how a business is run. Are there opportunities that the client is missing, ways to reduce costs or improve back-office organisation that would increase their productivity? In other

words, the bookkeepers' task is to make themselves an invaluable part of the business, helping the client to be a better manager. By adding value in this way, you may even be able to increase both your hours and prices!

Having secured your current clients, it is time to look for more, yes, even in a downturn. A bookkeeper's clients have relationships with many other business owners including suppliers and customers, and the bookkeeper is likely to know the names of many of them and which ones are their own ideal clients. If your clients think you are the bee's knees and your support has helped them improve their cash flow, why wouldn't they be prepared to introduce you to two or three business owners in their network who would value your work?

Build a relationship with your clients' accountants. Ask them if they are happy about the way you are preparing the accounts for the clients, and whether there are things you could do to make their job easier. If you are getting a lot of journal corrections at the end of the year from the accountant, they are probably not happy and are likely to be talking to your client about it. However, if the accountant loves your work, it is an opportunity to ask for referrals.

Join a networking organisation such as Business Network International (BNI) Australia, which has a highly structured referral program. It will most likely give you an opportunity to form a unique relationship with the accountant who's a member of your particular chapter, putting you far ahead of other bookkeepers their clients are using. However, be aware you still need to be able to prepare accounts to their standard, as they will value their relationship with their clients over that of any bookkeeper.



Greg Chapman



Dr Greg Chapman is the CEO of Empower Business Solutions and author of the books *The Five Pillars of Guaranteed Business Success* and *Price: How You Can Charge More without Losing Sales*. Visit [www.empowersolutions.com.au](http://www.empowersolutions.com.au) for more marketing tips.

And, you know what, if we weren't headed into a downturn, I would probably give the same advice. ■

All this effort to generate referrals will, of course, be wasted if a prospect's first impression of their potential new bookkeeper is not a positive one. That first impression nowadays is usually gleaned from a website. If you don't have one, or it was built on the cheap, and you don't have a professional email address, you may lose the client, no matter what glowing reference has been given. What if the accountant gives the potential client two bookkeepers from which to choose and the other one has a good website and you don't – what do you think your chances will be?

A good-looking website can create a great first impression, and does not need to be expensive. It increases your professionalism – and the chance of turning a prospect into a client. A good website will put you ahead of the overwhelming majority of your competitors. (Sad but true – most bookkeepers' websites, if they have one, are pretty woeful.)

Succeeding in a downturn is not about any single, silver-bullet strategy. It relies on a portfolio of strategies carried out systematically. These actions should not just be carried out once, but at regular intervals.



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