



## THE BENCHMARK

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# Business lessons from the field

**T**he 2007 Fiesta Bowl was what I (and millions of other fans) consider to be the best college football game played in recent years. That night, Boise State beat the University of Oklahoma 43-42 in overtime. The experts and oddsmakers expected Boise State to lose. Oklahoma was too big and too good.

How did Boise State pull off the win? And what does it mean for you?

**1. They were prepared with a well-thought-out game plan.** Are you prepared? Does your budget minimize non-essential costs? Have you reviewed your pricing to ensure you can compete? Are you proactive with your customers, managing budgets and delivery? Boise State was aware that they did not have the guns the Sooners had, but they knew how to expose the Sooners' weaknesses.

Everyone has the challenge of delivering consistent quality. Make this Job No. 1 this year. This one tactic exposes the weakness of any competitor — the challenge of keeping customers happy 98% of the time. Make certain everyone on your team understands what the customer considers "quality," and delivers it. You won't lose customers, and you will pick up some defectors along the way.

**2. They played to their strengths.** Boise State, while smaller, was solid in their skill positions. They were able to make plays outside of the tackles with their talented players.

Your sources of strength in a tight economy are relationships and cash. A strong cash position gives you the ability to leverage relationships with both customers and vendors. Have you talked with your bank about increasing your line of credit? Are you conserving cash by extending the life of your equipment? Have you gone to your vendors to press for better prices and services in exchange for faster payment or increased purchase volume? Have you negotiated higher prices with some of your customers, and lower prices with others to keep the relationships working for you?

Make certain every vendor and customer hears from you. Make cash and relationship management Job No. 2 this year.

**3. They took chances.** Boise State used trick plays to surprise the Sooners. They did not play the traditional post-season football game. This had the effect of neutralizing some of the Sooners' speed, as well as confusing the defense.

What kinds of trick plays do you have in your playbook? Are you willing to use aggressive pricing in select situations to win the big jobs? Are you willing to spend more money on marketing with a message that is both edgier and delivered more frequently? Customers have a lot of choices in a tight economy, and they *will* shop. You have to get your message through the noise, and be willing to "go low" on a few jobs at the right time. Make marketing Job No. 3 this year.

**4. They believed they could win.** Boise State had faith in their coach and in themselves as a team. This, in the end, might have been the difference. They knew the extent of the challenge, and they were not discouraged by it.

What are you doing to communicate the challenge and your plan to your team? Have you made certain that you have all of the right people on the bus? All it takes is one pessimist to sink the ship sometimes. Make certain it is not you, and that anyone else who takes that role gets coached back in — or coached out the door. People need to have faith in their leaders and trust their teammates. People respond to optimistic realism. Make team morale Job No. 4 this year.

What a game at the end! Are you kidding me? The Statue of Liberty\* trick play to win it. Boise State left it all on the field that night.

They did not worry so much about the opponent (*I like the Sooners just fine!*) as much as they focused on their own effort.

Did they get lucky? Maybe so. But luck, as they say, still favors the prepared — especially in today's tight economy.

**\* Lady Liberty on**

**the field:** The Statue of Liberty trick play consists of the quarterback faking a pass, then just standing there with the ball in his raised hand. The halfback, running a crossing route, nabs the ball and runs. It is usually seen at the high school level by a desperate team in a blowout game, and often, it doesn't work. But the move made headlines (and a win) in the 2007 Fiesta Bowl.