

# Mission Ready

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## The terrorist challenge to business: How to mitigate the weight of the unexpected

Within the last day, the news media has broadcast yet another Al Qaeda tape, in which the English speaking, "Azzam the American" promised a spectacular attack that would make our streets "run with blood." Such threats—even if they are only threats—can impact the American business community in a very negative way. It's not out of the question that vacations could be postponed (affecting the bottom line of hotels, restaurants, airline companies, etc.), or that the consummation of a business deal could be put on hold for a few weeks "just to see what develops," or that the consumer might think this is not the time to spend, but to save money—not for a rainy day, but for a possible catastrophic event.

We thought the readers of *Mission Ready* might be interested in how the Israeli business community assures its customers and investors that all will be well, whether or not a terrorist attack is realized.

Although one could argue that the nation of Israel is always on a state of high alert, with regard to terrorism, there *are* times of increased tension. Occasionally the IDF has targeted very popular, charismatic terrorist "godfathers," whose subsequent deaths have led to widespread, extremely vocal demonstrations and well publicized promises of unprecedented reprisals. Exactly what form the "revenge" will take is always unknown, but there is little doubt among Israelis that in a short time something very bad will happen inside the country. At such times, the "weight of the unexpected" hangs like a pall over Israel. As much as the business community insists upon keeping its normal routine in spite of the political situation, I would imagine business activities might be subdued during the mounting anticipation of a major terrorist action. Such are the subtleties of a terrorist campaign: just the threat of an attack can create enough anxiety in the community, for business owners, investors, and customers to step back, and wait for a better time to act.

The ways in which a proactive Israeli businessperson helps to mitigate the weight of the unexpected, might be of service to those of us who must await lesser crises, but feel equally compelled to take whatever control possible—not of the pending emergency, for that is impossible, but of our customer's perceptions of the emergency. If we can positively affect the way our customer views the unfolding events, the actual "big

event" will have lost much of its power to influence his/her decision. In fact, if we can effectively educate and motivate the customer, he/she will have made his/her decision without *waiting* for the emergency to materialize, convinced that, whatever happens, there will be no change in his/her business relationship with us. It all begins with an appreciation of what the least initiated might be feeling during a period of high tension. An Israeli "veteran" of the terrorist crisis, for example, might be so accustomed to the cycles of violence that he/she may forget for a moment that others—his/her customers and/or investors—are scared half to death by the repetitive news reports of ever increasing terror alerts, terrorist threats, government precautions, emergency procedures, etc. The first thing the wise Israeli businessperson does is reach for the phone, make contact with those who are important to his or her business, and walk them through the probable sequence of events, so that they not only know what to expect, but also realize such things have happened many times before during the history of their business relationship. Communication is everything! Anyone who has ever flown through severe turbulence on a passenger plane can recall the great relief when the pilot's calm, lazy drawl announces things might get a little "bumpy" for a while, and that everyone should fasten their seatbelts. On the other hand, if there is silence from the flight deck, we immediately assume the pilot is too busy to talk, because he or she is desperately fighting for control of the plane. The truth is, of course, that the pilot is yawning through the turbulence in either case, knowing full well the plane can withstand forces ten times as great. But if there is no communication, the imaginations of the passengers run wild.

The best way to mitigate the weight of the unexpected is to render it irrelevant. And once the customer is given the proper perspective, it *will* be irrelevant; he or she will be confident that, whatever may come, there will be no change to the enduring business relationship.

*Editor's Note: for a thorough discussion of the approach Israel businesses take to deal with the terrorist threat read Dan Carrison's new book, Business Under Fire. How Israeli Companies Are Succeeding in the Face of Terror—And What We Can Learn From Them.*