

I Survived the Recession

BY FELICIA BROWN

I've had what most people would call a thriving career since I became a massage therapist in 1994. With a lot of hard work, I grew my private practice over several years into a thriving day spa, and by 2005, it had more than 50 staff members and earned \$1.6 million in annual sales. I could never have imagined that three years later I would be financially scarred, emotionally worn, and sadly disillusioned about my career. What follows is the story of my rise and fall in the hopes it might offer insight and inspiration to others facing their own career struggles.



NOT INVINCIBLE

After building my little business into a booming day spa, I decided to sell it in 2005. The result was a level of financial security that I'd never dreamed possible when I took my first massage workshop so many years before. After the sale, I began to work as an educator, coach, and consultant, and had the opportunity to work with massage and spa professionals from all over the world. I had some incredible opportunities that distinguished me as an expert in both the massage and spa industries. My finances and career were very healthy.

Then came the economic downturn that wreaked havoc on a lot of businesses and individuals—spas and MTs included. When things started going south in 2008, I likened the recession to the period after the tragedy of 9/11. I truly believed that entrepreneurs who survived the post-9/11 era would be the ones to shine and prosper during this next stressful period. As someone who weathered the aforementioned storm with great success, I believed I could navigate pretty much anything in business.

That's why I confidently opened a high-end luxury day spa in the summer of 2008 after saying I would never own another spa again. After being approached by several former staff members looking for new opportunities—and finding a perfect retail space in the building next door to my consulting office—launching the spa seemed doable. With my past success as a spa owner (and a hefty pledge of collateral), the bank was happy to provide financing. I was off and running within 45 days of first considering the venture.

Things started off positively at the spa, but the realities of the recession soon set in. Clients who were practically waiting in line for appointments before we opened, quickly decided they needed



Felicia Brown (right) accepts the 2009 Spa Person of the Year award from the Day Spa Association board members Toni Fukuda (left) and Rosemary Weiner.

to cut back on spa services and other “unnecessary” purchases. Many people asked us to cut our prices or would only come in if we offered deep incentives or specials. Employees’ enthusiasm for promoting themselves and the business waned, as did the stream of new business. The result? My financial resources and the spa’s cash flow began to dry up after just a few months.

I can say unequivocally that my original assumptions about the economy and its potential impact on my business were totally incorrect. Contrary to what I originally believed, it became clear to me that companies and individuals who provide “luxury” or seemingly non-essential services, such as massage therapy and spa treatments, were at the top of the economic casualty list. I also realized I wasn’t as invincible an entrepreneur as I once thought.

After less than a year of operations, which included sleepless nights, dark depression, and severe financial anxiety, I made the difficult decision to close the spa in March 2009. Though I knew the financial and professional

repercussions, as well as irreversible damage to my credit, I realized there was no other choice. Ironically, three days later I was given the 2009 Spa Person of the Year Award from the Day Spa Association. It was an incredible honor to be recognized for my years of service, mentoring, and work with my profession and peers. But, unbeknownst to most of my colleagues, this celebration came during one of the worst times of my professional career. Truthfully, I almost felt guilty for accepting such an incredible honor at a time when I felt like such a failure. Still, the award and recognition inspired me to move on from the deeply emotional turn of events with a more positive attitude. It also gave me a sense of purpose and desire to refocus my attention on helping others through both my massage and consulting businesses.



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NEW PERSPECTIVE

Closing a business may not be the smoothest road to happiness or success, but it moved me toward both things a lot faster than owning the spa had. It's been well over a year since I closed the spa and began traveling down the road to professional and financial recovery. If I had to sum up the theme of this era in just a few words, it would have to be “never say ‘never’” as I have taken on a number of challenges and activities I did not anticipate. In this changed business climate, it's important to be flexible when thinking about your business.

Here are some examples of things I thought I would never do in my professional life, which have instead reinvigorated my career, helped pay the bills, and altered my perspective:

- Accept new massage clients (again).
- Be an on-call massage therapist for a former employer.
- Become a secret shopper.
- Default on a business loan.
- Look for a “real” job.
- See clients on Saturdays (again).
- Teach in a massage school (again).
- Work for a consulting client—as a contracted massage therapist.
- Work for a former employee of my spa—at her spa.

On a personal level, I've also had to re-examine my priorities, responsibilities, and “needs” in a whole new way. Some “I'll nevers” I had to rethink:

- Learning to can and preserve food.
- Looking for free plants on the Internet (and then digging them out of someone's yard).
- Selling furniture and personal property on eBay and Craig's list.
- Crying about said furniture as it rolled away from my house belonging to someone else.
- Getting a prescription for Xanax (anti-anxiety medication).
- Praying for lightning to hit my rental property.

CLIENT TEACHERS

Another shift in thinking for me came when I started doing outcall massages. Before the economy changed things so drastically, I had done perhaps five outcalls in the last 15 years. I absolutely hated dragging the table and myself into someone else's environment. I felt they took up more of my time and energy than they were worth. But last summer I got a call from a client and professional contact—a physician—requesting an outcall for his best friend, Norm, who was bedridden with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Something told me to say yes to this appointment, not just because I wouldn't need to bring a massage table, but perhaps because of the despair I heard in the doctor's voice on the phone that day.

My visits with Norm were completely different than those I was accustomed to in my private practice. Having to work within the confines of a home-based medical setting complete with a hospital bed, medical equipment, and a caregiver, was new for me. My own work style, body mechanics, and techniques all had to shift as a result, causing me a few aches and pains—physically and emotionally. But then I'd look over at my client, who in the span of less than a year had gone from being a successful physician and active outdoorsman to a man trapped in his house and his body. Seeing his atrophying muscles and sensing his deep levels of pain, depression, and perhaps resentment of his situation forced me to put my own situation into perspective. Comparatively, it was easy for me to tackle a few obstacles to provide some much-needed relaxation and pain relief for this client.

Working with Norm also made my business and financial problems seem insignificant, and it grounded me in a way I had not expected. Immediately after Norm's first session, the remaining sadness, grief, and

anger I felt about the spa closing and all the related details just fell away. Ever since, I've found it much easier to deal with those unpleasant realities in my life. I've also become much more diligent in keeping up with my exercise routine and maintaining a healthier diet and lifestyle. I know I must keep myself in the best health possible and take care of the only body I have. And I've learned to appreciate the simple pleasures and blessings of life I previously ignored or took for granted.

A few months after Norm died, I began working with Brad, another ALS patient. Though his physical condition was actually much worse than Norm's had been—he had absolutely no movement ability anywhere in his body and could not speak without the assistance of a special computer—Brad always brightened my day with his smile and positive energy. I could sense the frustration he lived with by being almost totally dependent on others, but Brad always made me feel better when I was around him.

Most memorably, when I arrived for our third appointment, Brad had a surprise waiting for me. He'd had a compliment about how my work helped him, programmed into his computer. This was something he probably could not have done alone and I realized he must have thought about it quite a bit between our visits.

As I listened to the mechanical voice tell me how much he could tell I loved my work and taking care of people, tears streamed down my face. To know that I had made a difference in his life was unbelievably rewarding and touching. That fact that someone in his condition would make the effort to make me feel good about myself was so meaningful and humbling to me. I will never forget it.

Since working with these two special clients, I have felt empowered to take charge of my own life and health in a much more proactive way

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and remember what matters first. Seeing Norm and Brad's struggles and frustrations up close made me see that my financial problems were quite manageable, and I gained a new perspective on my own priorities. Money is not at the top of the list. The things that do top the list include making a difference in other peoples' lives and making each day of my own life count. Being a massage therapist continues to be a way for me to achieve both of these.

BEING A SURVIVOR

Since I closed my last spa many days have been difficult, but I am so much happier now. I rarely wake up with a sense of dread or fear about what will or won't happen at work. I feel a lot more optimistic about my life and future than I did in those few months the high-end spa was open. And I still get to make a living doing what I love.


The other work I truly enjoy—writing, consulting, and teaching—is flowing into my life in a steady stream and keeping my bills paid. By letting

go of a business that was not bringing me joy or prosperity, I made room and time to again do something else I really love—helping others succeed. Now that I have had both incredible success and marked failure in the world of business, I can also offer a truly well-rounded perspective and realistic expertise to my consulting clients.

To be fair, life could be much worse. After all, I didn't lose my home, health, husband, or any of the people who really matter to me in my life. I haven't gone hungry or been without clothes, and my beloved dogs haven't run away. I've found out who my real friends are and realized yet again just how much they mean to me.

I have emerged on the other side of the crisis. Yes, I'm a little worse for wear, wary of risk, and a bit tired, but I am still alive and kicking and have rediscovered that I am a true survivor—someone who is willing to do whatever it takes to get through the difficulties of the moment to find a better place. I have also come to the realization that no matter what happens with the economy, I will come out just fine because I can depend on myself and my own inner strength and resources to pull me through.

We all have issues and problems to deal with in our time on this earth. Whether you face struggles in your massage practice or personal life, there are some days when things can seem unbearable. In these economic times, we've all been reminded how much of a challenge life can be. But whatever your situation in your business or your life, I believe that like me, you are a survivor and you, too, will do whatever it takes to make it through. **m&b**

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