

CEOs tune up with plastic surgery

Nipping, tucking and getting hip to technology

When New York City executive Robert Slatkin lost his high-level job, he took what might seem an extreme step to gain confidence and keep himself marketable.

He sought surgery on his nose, jaw and sagging neck that he said made him look worn out in a sea of more youthful and go-getting CEO job candidates. At 58, the former hospital executive and one-time college swimmer still felt strong and knew he had the business skills, but wanted others to view him as energetic and fit - a guy in control of his image and his company.

"I'm back in the game," said a rejuvenated Mr. Slatkin, who has since started a wellness and fitness firm, Body 24-7.

"This is all about self-esteem, when you walk out there and how you feel," he said of the importance of image in corporate success - particularly when the economic stakes have never been higher. "You can look great, but if you are not projecting confidence, people read it, they feel it. If you want to have a chance in this world - I don't care if you are looking for a job or starting a business - you have got to take a risk or you're not going anywhere."

Across the country, many executives - some displaced and others concerned about avoiding such fate - are retooling themselves personally and professionally to remain marketable as top-level jobs evaporate or are consolidated in the recession.

Some are seeking more training, while others are finding comfort in the camaraderie of their company-running peers, creating support groups that fuel their passion for entrepreneurship, even as the economy wanes.

"This is the time when we are seeing a lot of executives going back into some sort of education program. They are stepping back and saying, 'Gee, I better upgrade and update myself.' What we see is more concern with stepping back and thinking, 'What are the skills that I need to acquire to become more competitive in the marketplace?'" said Ana Dutra, the Chicago-based chief executive officer at Korn/Ferry International's Leadership and Talent Consulting Group.

In the tough economy, she said, "They are saying I'm not just going to jump into the next opportunity but rather thinking about what the skills, experience and competency gaps are for me," and then seeking out new ways to improve themselves with the eye on a better fit for their long-term aspirations.

Along with management training, some executives are focusing on embracing emerging technology, particularly social networking for corporate marketing, which is key to keeping their edge and showing that they are hip, said Ann Mack, the director of trend spotting at the New York power agency JWT.

"Not only are executives retooling their professional and physical profiles to stay competitive, but they are also retooling or, in the case of some, building their digital profiles," she said. "Online networks like LinkedIn and Xing are seeing a surge in popularity due to the economic crisis. But beyond these professional networks, you see executives becoming conversant across a number of digital platforms."

In some industries, she said, "executives are realizing it's a liability not to display some degree of tech savvy. And these days, that means having an updated Facebook profile, Tweeting regularly on Twitter and having the latest and greatest mobile app. Having an active digital life not only helps to promote your personal brand, but also signals that you're up to speed or willing to learn new things. And that's an attractive trait in any executive."

Dr. Sam Rizk, a board-certified plastic surgeon, said he has seen a rise over the past year of executives, many out of work, traveling to his New York practice for a facial cleanup to improve their chances against tough competition.

The surgical work is not cheap, he said, but for patients such as Mr. Slatkin, it's an increasingly important investment to set them apart in the business world.

"Some of them have held a job for 25 years, are in their late 40s, early 50s, and have never considered plastic surgery," he said. "Now they are laid off, the competition is fierce and they find themselves going into the job market with a lot of younger people."

"I think that our society and our country judges us by our appearance, whether we like it or not. But these are men who want to be judged by their resume, very educated people," he said. "If you give the image that you are tired and have not slept, that image doesn't do well in an interview and people do make character judgments about the way you look."

Mr. Slatkin added, "The economy is so bad ... and it's not getting better soon. You need hope. This gives you hope."

Some of the key entrepreneurs in Nashville, Tenn., see strength in numbers as they weather the financial crisis. They are maintaining their energy and focus through a monthly informal support group called Better Bootstrap, where company "war stories" are told and sharing of fundamental business concerns is welcome.

The meetings, according to BetterBootstrap.com, "enable CEOs to learn from their peers' experiences" as they strategize in a challenging economy. The "bootstrapping" encourages the business leaders to be self-sustaining in hard times as they creatively weather the crisis.

"Being an entrepreneur," the Web site noted, "takes guts."

Ms. Dutra acknowledged that while the economy may be poor, it also provides opportunity, particularly for those who are out of work, to refocus on what matters to them and redefine themselves in a stronger light.

"The smart ones," she said, "are using this time to better themselves."