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PAIN KILLER VS. VITAMIN

By Mark Bregman

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I learned the expression “Is it a pain killer or a vitamin?” in the angel / VC investment world. This question is asked of start-ups by investors, to determine if the product being developed and funded is essential for the intended purpose (a pain killer; a must-have), or just nice to have (a vitamin). When a CEO applies this to his/her current products or services, the answer is very revealing. In an economic downturn, very few customers buy vitamins! But, they still need pain relievers. In the aerospace sector, pain can often be size and weight – the need to fit critical technology in a smaller, lighter box. Companies will pay millions for such pain relievers. In the communications world, pain can be the need to transmit more with less – less power, using less bandwidth, over fewer, smaller lines.

In my world, HR and executive search, a person can be a pain. I don't mean an annoyance, like a “pain in the ----”, I mean a real pain – an obstacle to progress, unable to generate needed results, an impediment to team functioning. A new, more effective person who gets past these obstacles is the “pain reliever.” I tell my clients they should only hire me if I can relieve pain, and have a critical, measurable impact on their bottom line. For 2009, we all need to think this way!