

# FINANCE AND COMMERCE

## Recession survivors tell their stories

BY SCOTT CARLSON

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At least three small-company executives are crediting flexibility and creativity as key reasons their Twin Cities-based businesses are weathering the national recession.

Whether they are foraging for new business, asking employees to take furloughs, or ramping up customer service, small companies have to be more nimble. That was the message from three executives — Edie French, CEO of [iDream.tv/Location Images](http://iDream.tv/LocationImages), Joseph Richburg, co-owner of Keystone Computer Solutions, and Larry Vortherms, general manager of Custom Fab Solutions—in a talk Thursday at the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce's first Economic Recovery series program.

In the talk, titled "Surviving the Recession: Ready to Grow," the business panelists said they have employed an array of tactics to overcome the nation's down economy. "Today we are leaner," said Richburg, whose St. Paul-based business provides contract IT consulting services. A year ago, Keystone had about 30 to 35 employees, he said, and today its work force numbers about 20.

Richburg added that Keystone recently added recycling of used computer equipment to its stable of business offerings in a bid to differentiate itself from competitors.

Now Richburg said he is beginning to "see a glimmer of hope" that the worst of the economic downturn is over. "Our number of job orders is increasing," he said.

When French saw several large clients scale back on their business with her Minneapolis-based media production company, she looked for other ways to generate revenue.

Earlier this month, [iDream.tv/Location Images](http://iDream.tv/LocationImages) announced the launch of "[Project Green Screen](#)," a Web video clip service that is aimed at providing businesses high-quality video messaging for their company websites. French said her company's new service enables businesses to introduce key staff or promote products or services in a concise, compelling manner.

French also said her company got a grant from the Chamber's Grow Minnesota program for business planning.

Custom Fab Solutions, a Chanhassen-based specialty fabricator, took several steps in response to the recession,



Edie French, CEO of [iDream.tv/Location Images](http://iDream.tv/LocationImages), Speaks at Grow Minnesota! Economic Recovery Series <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbX7KqdSgGg>

Vortherms said. The actions included employee furloughs, worker pay cuts ranging from 25 to 50 percent, and renegotiation of vendor and bank agreements, he said.

Custom Fab also received a grant from Grow Minnesota so it could retain some key engineering positions, which is enabling the company to develop new products and take on new customers, he said.

"We think the recovery will come in mid- to late 2010, but I don't expect it just to shoot up," Vortherms said. To be ready for that recovery, Custom Fab is working to turn around customer orders substantially faster than it used to, he said.

"As a smaller organization, we have to be more flexible," Vortherms said.

View Video: Edie French, CEO of [iDream.tv/Location Images](http://iDream.tv/LocationImages), Speaks at Grow Minnesota! Economic Recovery Series <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbX7KqdSgGg>

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