

Small businesses navigate the rough economy

Owners offer up tips and advice they have found beneficial

By Katherine Michalets
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WAUKESHA – There has been no bigger test for most local business owners than the economic. Those who have managed to navigate the difficult financial times have both worked to improve the basics and have changed the ways they approach doing business.

Recently, several small-business owners in Waukesha County offered up tips and advice for other small-business owners that they have found to be useful. The bottom line for them all was quality customer service.

Norm Bruce, owner of Martha Merrell's Books, 231 W. Main St., Waukesha

"Service, service, service," stressed Bruce, a longtime downtown Waukesha business owner who shares his storefront with fellow business Cuddles.

"There are things we always do when someone walks into the store: They get greeted right away, 'How are you doing?' Get the discussion going and after they buy something you thank them and say it's appreciated," he said.

Another important aspect of staying in business during the recession has been getting to know customers, such as learning who their favorite author is or what their favorite genre is, Bruce said. "Most of the time it turns into a sale for me," he said.

Also helping customers find what they are looking for is key.

If someone walks into the shop looking to buy a gift, Bruce said he will ask them questions, such as what does the gift receiver like and then work with the shopper to find appropriate gifts or books. If an appropriate item is not found in his business, Bruce said he will suggest another local business that may carry it.

Other ways to lure cus-

tomers in include something as simple as opening the door on a warm day. To learn about how customers shop and buy, Bruce suggested the book, "Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping."

Tom Smith, owner of Tom's Heating, 212 W. St. Paul Ave., Waukesha

Having been in business for 57 years, Smith has learned what works and what doesn't work when times are lean.

"Give good service and have satisfied customers – that has sure helped us for these years," he said.

But also very important is having a positive attitude.

"I think a lot of people in this economy, and any time, they are their own worst enemy; they have negative thoughts," Smith said.

Another tendency can be to cut back on service and products, which Smith advises against. He said he recently read a story in the Wall Street Journal that said when Sears bought Kmart about four to five years ago, it cut back on expenses such as decorating the stores, which hurt their image.

In his experience, Smith said he strives to "keep the trucks neat and be upbeat and do things right."

He also acknowledges that clients have less money to spend so his staff will suggest installing a lower-cost system, but will do it do it well so the customers return for service work.

"Your satisfied repeat customers are worth so much," he said. "Even your big businesses, I think that is where they succeed because they do more to get the repeat."

Ingrid Herzog, co-owner with husband Hansi, Minuteman Press, 2325 Parklawn Drive, Suite E, Waukesha

Herzog said there are two very important things she and her staff focus on when it comes to being successful.



Charles Auori/Freeman Staff

Norm Bruce talks with Char Sullivan of Waukesha at Martha Merrell's/Cuddles in Waukesha. Sullivan was looking for books to take to her grandchildren for the first Thanksgiving dinner hosted by her children.

"One is current customers and what you do for them. It's customer service. You have to go above and beyond to keep them," she said.

The other is keeping an eye on how money is spent. She said when working with vendors, really scrutinize any charges and to watch expenses. Herzog said even a \$5 surcharge during the tough economy is a big deal.

"You have to talk to your vendor to see if there is something less expensive and you have to share that with your customer," Herzog said.

It's important to work with customers to find an agreeable deal that also works out for the business. Herzog said that in past years she may have offered a discount of 15 percent, but now it might be 10 percent. Or if a client doesn't have as much money to spend on a project, then she may suggest reducing the size of the order.

"Internally, you make sure you have meetings with employees and learn what ways to cut costs back," she said.

Even though times are tough, Herzog said it's still good to be involved in the community. She said her husband is a coach at a local school and they also make donations.

"You get your best people on board and run lean and mean," Herzog said.

Harry Schaff, owner of Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory, 807 Genesee St., Delafield

When Schaff went into business in Delafield one-and-a-half years ago, he was told that people would spend money on quality products.

That has proven true, although Schaff said he is

still careful to keep expenses low.

Advertising is also important as it informs people about the business, he said.

Important costs to keep an eye on are inventory and payroll. Schaff said he's learned to schedule staff wisely and to "watch every penny." He also looks for deals.

Schaff also said customer service is always important, but ultimately it comes down to using a lot of common sense when operating a business to be successful during the downturn in the economy.

Nora Barton, owner of Nora B's, 890 Elm Grove Road, 205-1, Elm Grove

During the time Barton has been in business, she said she has learned how to give customers what they want while keeping an eye on the bottom line.

At Nora B's, Barton said they have not cut back on portion size and quality as many others have done to save money.

"Keep providing quality and people will want to come and have it," she said. "Don't skimp because of the bad times. Do not cut any corners and the customers appreciate that."

As a restaurant owner, Barton said she has learned how important it is to keep an eye on portion cost.

"So when the sandwich is coming out you know how much you are going to make on it," Barton said. "Watch everything and do your research."

She said the business just did a complete portion cost analysis and learned of areas that needed improvement.

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