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Lessons From The Trenches

Three local business owners look back on their beginnings and share advice for succeeding today

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If history teaches us anything, it may be that the future is impossible to predict. When it comes to business, a lesson learned at the consequence of a bad decision is much like taking a generous spoonful of castor oil: it may be good for what ails you, but chances are, you're not going to like it.

For prospective small business owners and budding entrepreneurs, the proposition of setting up shop can be daunting, but others have demonstrated that it can be done.

We spoke to three local entrepreneurs with small businesses to get their advice on what it takes to make a small business succeed.

First Drafts

At the time when they opened the doors to their enterprise, the extent of prior business experience shared by Wachusett Brewery's three founding members — Ned LaFortune, Kevin Bucker, and Peter Quinn — read like a checklist of imminent failure.

Photo/Shawn Tolson

No plant design experience. No packaging design experience. Sales experience? Distribution experience? Accounting experience? Zip. Zero. Zilch.

All that the three friends from Worcester Polytechnic had was a passion for beer and a confidence — instilled from tours and volunteer work at local, craft breweries — that they could successfully open one of their own.

“When we celebrated our 10-year anniversary, my quote was that we had no right getting into this



Ned LaFortune, president, Wachusett Brewery in Westminster.

business,” said LaFortune, the 40-year-old president of the brewery. “I still firmly believe that. But we took our engineering degrees and biology degree and scraped together enough knowledge to be able to do it, and I feel we have certainly earned the right to be here.”

During the first few years, and with minimal financing available, the Westminster trio relied on their engineering expertise to circumvent a lack of funding for new machinery. For example, a 1,000-gallon pharmaceutical tank (salvaged from a stainless steel yard) was redesigned to serve as a brew kettle during the day and as a hot water heater overnight.

“We designed and built it,” LaFortune said of their brew house. “We knew how it worked and we were able to tweak it and make it work really well for us.”

Their lack of business knowledge forced the three WPI graduates to learn all facets of the trade, and while that initially made for 80-hour work weeks, it also developed strong, personal relationships with vendors.

As LaFortune sees it, those relationships are the reason why the brewery sells 95 percent of its beer in Massachusetts, an uncharacteristic accomplishment for any craft brewery.

“Most breweries of our size across the country have 20 to 25 wholesalers or more,” said LaFortune. “We work with two.”

But the brewery’s 15-year history is not without its moments of uncertainty and strife.

In 1998, faced with pressure from local vendors to compete with other craft breweries — Samuel Adams and Harpoon, to name two — the Wachusett team decided to follow suit and release seasonal varieties. But with only four years under their belt, LaFortune and his partners did not have the capital in place, nor the understanding of the cost required to package and distribute so many distinct products.

“We extended the product line too far,” said LaFortune. “We couldn’t do it economically. That was the worst decision and the most difficult lesson because we almost went out of business.

Stick with some core brands and sell those at a bigger distribution area,” he continued. “Sell them harder and heavier and get better distribution of those and use that cash flow to finance the rest. We didn’t do that.”

Expansion By Design

Following a tour through the halls of Elevation Exhibits in Shrewsbury — an office space that exudes a Tim Burton-esque style, only with added splashes of brighter color — the company's creative intentions bare no mystery.

The design firm caters to such high-profile brands as Microsoft and Boston Acoustics, and while the company enjoys a steady climb in profitability, the foundation for its current success is rooted in a history peppered with the occasional missed opportunity.

At the time of the company's inception in March 2006, Elevation Exhibits offered its clients a variety of design and marketing work tailored specifically to trade shows. But soon, a client called New England Development came calling, asking for brochures and print marketing, an enterprise oozing with potential, but also laden with risk.

Photo/Shawn Tolson



Jim Burke, founder, and Ken Karns, president, Elevation Exhibits in Shrewsbury.

"I thought it was a little bit beyond what our capabilities were and I didn't want to risk the relationship that I had trying to pursue something that maybe we would have failed at," said Ken Karns, president of Elevation Exhibits. "In hindsight, we probably should've pursued that; we should've asked vehemently for the opportunity while explaining to the client that we're trying to develop our business in that area."

Make no mistake about it, Elevation Exhibits is aggressively pursuing similar opportunities now, and Karns, along with company founder Jim Burke, presently describe their business as a full-service design firm, not one catering only to trade show exhibits.

The turning point for the two partners came after they surveyed the core of their business and analyzed the skill set that they, along with their 46 employees, brought to the table.

Recognizing that they already possessed the necessary skills required of a traditional marketing initiative, Karns and Burke took a leap of faith at the next available opportunity.

It may be a wise business strategy, but it's one that the 44-year-old founder has learned from his 52-year-old partner. For a year following his company's establishment, Burke ran the show, but he learned that his creative personality did not incorporate the type of business mindset necessary to succeed.

“In our industry...somebody has to bring all those element together and make the bottom line sing,” Burke said.

That somebody is Karns, who merged his company with Burke’s in 2007. Since that time, Karns has held the reins when it comes to the company’s business ventures and his current focus, generated from those past, missed opportunities, is tied to resiliency.

“In the current economic times you need to be focused on what you’re doing,” Karns said, “but you need to be flexible enough to move off of what that focus is to generate a related business.”

Manufactured Growth

Fifteen years ago, when Tom Sioui mapped out the plan for Slideways Inc., a manufacturer of plastic components for conveyor systems and packaging machinery, he had the technical know-how and the engineering background, but he lacked the business insight required to realize his plans.

An assessment of a similar, local company provided him with the general business model by which to construct his own enterprise; but the necessary order by which he needed to establish each facet of it was not as clear. If

he had the chance to start over, he would definitely do things differently.

“We’re both engineers,” he said, recalling the thought process that he and his partner, Glenn Priest, shared at the time of their grand opening. “We’re excited to go buy machines, because we want to make parts.”

Enthusiastically, they invested their own money into new machines, but they did so before they had any marketing materials available.

“So we’re ready to make parts,” he continued, “but now we’ve got to tell people that we’re ready to make parts.” He paused to reflect on the period of time (roughly 45 days), during which their machines sat idle. “We should’ve been more

Photo/Shawn Tolson



Tom Sioui, founder, Slideways Inc. of Worcester.

ready to tell people that we were ready,” he said.

Of course, even when his company had a secure customer base, Sioui realized that his business wasn't growing.

With his own frustration level peaking, and added pressure from his wife, the now-44-year-old understood that he needed to be more proactive in his approach.

“Once we got out there, served the customer well, and established ourselves as being able to make these parts for people, we thought it would grow by itself,” he said. “It just didn't happen. You can open a company and you can create a paycheck for yourself, and that gets you so far; or you can try to build a company. They're two distinctly different things.”

Sioui credits the consultants at ICE for many of his recent business decisions and the subsequent success that they have generated.

“Go out and seek the advice of other people,” he said.

“There are a lot of resources out there. Finding the right person who can mentor you and point you in the right direction is really important.”