

PITTSBURGH BUSINESS TIMES

AUGUST 27, 2004

Seeking new perspectives

PowerLink, SCORE provide advice to foster small business growth

BY MEGHAN MARTIN

For years, good economic times and a steady flow of business kept the phones at Bell Advertising Services ringing.

However, when the economy declined in the 1990s and companies replaced hirings with layoffs, its owners faced a dilemma.

"The question was, how are we going to grow and get more business if nobody's hiring?" said Linda Weinzetl, Bell Advertising's president and owner.

Ms. Weinzetl and co-owner Diana Hartman realized the question was a crucial one. After more than 20 years operating under the same business strategy, they knew they needed outside help to develop a new one.

"You start to question. You know that the economy is tanking, and so this all can't be your fault. But you wonder, what am I doing wrong?" Ms. Hartman said.

The women found what they were looking for in PowerLink, a nonprofit organization that joins women-owned businesses with panels of volunteer advisors for a year of expert advice.

"The thinking behind PowerLink is, if a woman is given the things that she lacks for one year, can she be more profitable?" said Deborah Moses, a former banking executive and the Mount Washington-based organization's executive director.

Enter the company's five-person PowerLink panel.



Photo by Joe Wojcik

DOUBLE DUTY: Panta-Rhei Media president Martha O'Grady sought the counsel of both SCORE and PowerLink to get her multi-media company off the ground and, later, to define strategies to help it succeed.

Ms. Weinzetl and Ms. Hartman met with the panel members once each quarter for a year, starting in May 2003. Since the beginning of that process, the company's gross profit increased by about 50 percent, Ms. Hartman said, adding that the figure can be partially attributed to an increasingly favorable economic climate.

Positive results aside, putting their company under the PowerLink microscope was not without its frightening moments.

"We decided we were going to

be 100 percent truthful with the panel. There are a lot of things you want to hide, because maybe it points out your inadequacies," Ms. Hartman said. "The benefit was that it forced us to look at ourselves differently... and after we did that, things began to fall into place."

Ms. Moses agreed that the process can be daunting for small business owners, many of whom can become stuck in the rut of their own success.

PowerLink charges an administrative fee for connecting firms with advisory panels that ranges from \$250 to \$1,000, de-

pending on the company's annual revenue. Also, firms must have at least two employees, have been in existence for at least two years and have a minimum annual revenue of \$200,000 to participate.

"Our 'sweet spot' is already established companies, and this criteria is a way for us to gauge whether a company has gotten over the hump of start up," Ms. Moses said.

To date, PowerLink has connected 94 local businesses with advisory panels, many of which continue to interact with each other after their year has ended.

“PowerLink encourages women to continue because the whole promise of PowerLink is the power of advice,” Ms. Moses said.

Good advice can be the difference between success and failure for a small business, said S. Thomas Emerson, director of Carnegie Mellon University’s Donald H. Jones Center for Entrepreneurship.

“Mentoring is a key to success here,” Mr. Emerson said. “If [entrepreneurs] have experienced business people who can take a look at the problem and can view it from different angles, often the shortcoming is pretty apparent and the fix is pretty easy ... it’s just a matter of being able to see it in a different light.”

The small business owners who succeed, Mr. Emerson said, are often those who tap into networks of people who offer fresh perspectives and sage advice.

Organizations such as PowerLink and SCORE: Counselors to America’s Small Business (formerly known as the Service Corps of Retired Executives) can offer such mentoring to small business owners, he said.

According to the state De-

partment of Labor & Industry’s Center for Workforce Information and Analysis, by the end of 2003, about 2 million Pennsylvanians were employed by businesses with one to 50 employees.

Pittsburgh’s SCORE chapter, based in the U.S. Small Business Administration’s Pittsburgh district offices Downtown, pairs entrepreneurs with volunteer mentors, many of whom are retired executives. The organization has about 60 volunteers with a wide range of corporate and small-business backgrounds, which enable them to consult each other when new questions arise.

“Co-counseling,” as Walt Becker, a SCORE counselor and retired marketing executive from Robinson Township-based Bayer Corp., called it.

“It’s basically a premise on which we work. When somebody comes to us ... we assign them a prime counselor, but what happens is that no one counselor is going to be able to answer all the questions that this person might have. So, I will call on one of those others, and we will have a co-counseling session.”

Mr. Becker estimated that in

■ AT A GLANCE

Small Business Assistance

Two local organizations whose goal is to help entrepreneurs find success:

■ **PowerLink**, a nonprofit organization that assists women-owned companies by linking them with customized panels of experts that advise them on ways to grow

Phone number/Web address: (412) 431-4110; www.powerlink.org

■ **SCORE: Counselors to America’s Small Business**, a nonprofit organization that pairs entrepreneurs with volunteer mentors who counsel them on business growth strategies

Phone number/Web address: Pittsburgh chapter (412) 395-6560; www.scorepittsburgh.com

his eight years as a SCORE volunteer, he has worked with roughly 150 entrepreneurs — 85 percent of which were involved with start-ups.

One-on-one SCORE counseling sessions, which are free and confidential, were what helped Martha O’Grady, president of Turtle Creek-based Panta-Rhei Media Inc., organize her multimedia company 18 years ago.

“I initially went to SCORE because my background was in theater and communications, and I was struggling with the business end of things,” she said.

While Ms. O’Grady has kept in contact over the years with the SCORE members, including Mr. Becker, who helped her get

Panta-Rhei on its feet, she also participated in a PowerLink panel in 1995. Both organizations, she said, were instrumental in her company’s success.

“They’re very different experiences,” Ms. O’Grady said. “I think SCORE is helpful when you have one particular issue in your business that you would like to have someone with experience look at with you. PowerLink is a much more intensive process, because it’s year-long and you usually have a panel of people with expertise in a variety of different business matters. It’s like a full physical exam.”

MS. MARTIN is an intern with the Pittsburgh Business Times.

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