
Award-winning Mid-Columbia entrepreneurs share advice

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On the rollercoaster ride of starting a new business, new entrepreneurs sometimes learn hard lessons through trial and error. But some of these trials can be avoided. In this column, award-winning local business owners share their advice for new entrepreneurs. The featured businesses won entrepreneurial awards sponsored by the Richland Rotary Club. The annual awards honor new businesses in Benton and Franklin counties for exemplary entrepreneurial spirit.

- Be an informed risk-taker. It is important to research your industry before you start a business, but over-study can lead to risk aversion and paralysis. Tim Arntzen, who owns the boat tour business Columbia River Journeys with his wife Shannon, likened it to being on a high dive at the swimming pool. "Risks will always be there, but sooner or later you have to commit yourself and jump," he said. Columbia River Journeys started in 1996 and now conducts about 165 trips annually out of a 180-day season. In addition to local residents, Arntzen's customers have included visiting delegations from Russia, Taiwan and Australia.
- Understand how to reach your target customers. "When we first started out, we did a lot of industry trade shows, spending about \$50,000 annually" said Scott Somers, owner of Advanced Concepts & Design. The Richland company, started in 1992, makes sampling devices for liquids. "We discovered that trade shows were good places to make contacts, but not sales leads," Somers said. With the advice of a marketing consultant, the company now targets its customers--environmental compliance managers--through direct mail. The technique has proven effective; Somers' company now has 13 distributors in the United States and Canada.
- Expect little or no profit at the beginning. For the first few years, most businesses are focused on building a customer base and recovering their return on investment. The Arntzens, for example, kept their existing jobs to maintain a stable income when they first started Columbia River Journeys. Tim continues to work for the City of Pasco.
- Cultivate your employees. "Hire good people, train them and trust them," advised Jane Winslow of the graphic design firm WinSome Design. Winslow said she treats her employees as though they own the company. "I train them not just to do their jobs, but to understand the whole business," she said. If Winslow is away from the office, any employee can step in to do what needs to be done. The approach has paid off; WinSome sales have quadrupled since the company began in 1996. The company gained national attention this month when Lands' End featured it in its corporate catalogue. Winslow and her staff had purchased Lands' End shirts with custom-designed corporate logos.
- Invest in a quality infrastructure. Avoid the temptation to skimp on equipment and other items that are critical for running the business. Said Winslow: "After three years, I'm already looking for upgraded computers and furniture. If I had invested more at the beginning, it would have cost me less in the long run." Arntzen of Columbia River Journeys made a costly, but ultimately profitable,

- investment soon after the business started. "Early on, we decided to use some of our savings to correct a design defect in our jet boat engines. It was expensive, but the business would have been held back without it," he said.
- Build networks. Get to know your suppliers, distributors and even competitors. "We're on our competitors' Christmas card lists, and they're on ours," said Somers of Advanced Concepts & Design. "In this business, you can't try to shut someone else out, or it will come back to you. We share technical data that benefits us all." Jane Winslow recommends assembling a team of trustworthy and experienced advisors, including other business owners, accountants, bankers and lawyers. "Spend time with them so they understand your business well enough to advise you effectively," she said.

An interest group on new ventures will give local entrepreneurs and business owners more learning and networking opportunities. The first meeting, featuring a Seattle venture consultant speaking on raising capital, is June 17 at the Richland DoubleTree Hotel/Hanford House. For more information, contact Marv Clement at 375-2789.