
New businesses get help making informed decisions

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When Debbie Savino of Kennewick started Amber Waves Baking Company in 1997 with five hundred dollars, she was thrilled to see profits in just three weeks. Savino, who makes specialty breads for area restaurants and retailers, is considering licensing her recipes for even wider distribution. Savino attributes at least part of her success to ongoing help from Columbia Basin College's Small Business Development Center (SBDC).

"As a new business owner, I've got a hundred questions," Savino said. "I talk with Blake Escudier at the SBDC about once a month to brainstorm ideas and options. Blake helps keep me on track; it's like having a very experienced business partner." The SBDC helps small business owners and entrepreneurs with training, counseling and research. The Kennewick-based SBDC serves individuals and organizations in Benton and Franklin Counties. Many services are free; others are available for a nominal charge.

The Tri-Cities SBDC began in 1987, funded by Columbia Basin College through a grant from the Washington Small Business Development Center. To assist clients, the local SBDC works with other experts from Washington State University Tri-Cities Business LINKS, the Tri-Cities Enterprise Association and the Benton-Franklin Regional Council.

Escudier, SBDC program director since 1997, provides more than 1200 hours per year of free counseling to people such as Savino on business issues. "I've got about 100 people I'm talking with at any one time," he said. "Most of them want to start, expand or revitalize a business. I help them get more knowledge about the industry and think through their options. That, in turn, helps them make more informed decisions."

Escudier, backed up with his network of experts, is prepared to advise clients on a variety of issues – including purchase or sale of businesses, policies and procedures, cash flow analysis, business and market plan development, business location analysis, plant layout, work flow analysis and export/import assistance. According to Escudier, one of the most valuable but little-known services is a professional evaluation of a new product or idea. For \$300, SBDC clients get a written, systematic evaluation of the commercial viability of their new product, service, invention or idea. The Innovation Assessment Center in Pullman, Wash., conducts the evaluation for the SBDC. All financial and other proprietary information is kept confidential.

Ron Green of the Kennewick company Knight Sports benefited from one of the Center's assessments. This summer, Green plans to introduce SKIZZO™, an illuminated, nighttime outdoor game. "The evaluators estimated our chance of success based on criteria such as research and development, market niche, product performance and legal protection," Green said. "Their report confirmed our plans and gave us more in-depth information than we could have gathered ourselves."

SBDC's thrice-yearly seminars serve 200 to 400 people per year. Typical topics are accounting, taxes, sales force training, capitalization resources, marketing and customer relations, and computerized business systems.

The SBDC tracks economic indicators reported by its clients. Last year, SBDC clients added 52 more jobs to their firms. In the last two years, SBDC clients invested \$700,000 to \$1 million in capital improvements. "Though it's impossible to measure SBDC's direct contribution to community economic impacts, we like to think our services helped these business owners move ahead," Escudier said.

The Tri-Cities SBDC is one of 22 such centers across Washington state, funded through public and private organizations including the U.S. Small Business Administration. The Washington state SBDC Internet website is located at www.sbdc.wsu.edu. It includes the quarterly newsletter, Network News.

For more information about the Tri-Cities SBDC, contact Blake Escudier at 735-6222.