



FIREFIGHTERS OF NORTHEAST WISCONSIN 2013

Our 3rd annual endeavor aims to take two newer companies to the next level of competitiveness

STORY BY SEAN FITZGERALD,
NEW NORTH B2B PUBLISHER

A LITTLE MORE THAN TWO YEARS AGO, *New North B2B* set out to improve the outlook of two northeast businesses who needed professional help to put out the fires within their company, identify permanent solutions to overcoming those obstacles, and chart a course for continued success.

With the help of a pair of northeast Wisconsin's leading business consultants and six months of intensive work from the business owners themselves, we were able to point these companies in the right direction. All three firms – one of the companies split its distinctly two different operations into two separate companies – continue to remain successful today.

Now in its third year, we kick off our 3rd annual Firefighters of Northeast Wisconsin initiative with two businesses that aren't necessarily troubled or threatened with the prospect of going out of business. Instead, it includes two relatively stable companies looking at moving out of the start-up phase and on to the next level of development and growth.

Cake Anatomy of Kaukauna, owned by Dawn Bybee, and RentSmartRewards of Green Bay, owned by Jo Edwards, are both sole proprietorships that have stood the test of the

launch and start-up phases of their business, but need to continue to grow in order to remain successful. Owners of both businesses recognize now is the time to initiate that growth, but both acknowledge certain challenges and weaknesses getting to that next level of success strictly on their own. But they're committed to putting in the work to see their respective businesses turn to the next chapter.

We've matched each of these entrepreneurs up with two of northeast Wisconsin's leading small business consultants and strategists, who've agreed to donate a few hours of their time each month over the next five months to help these companies put together a plan to go from start-up phase to growth. The business owners will do all the heavy lifting, but will have the guidance and advisement of top-notch talent to help them avoid any fires along the way.

Both business owners have agreed to share their journey with B2B readers, and we're committed to providing a monthly update beginning with our June issue and leading up to a capstone article at the end of this third annual Firefighters of Northeast Wisconsin initiative later this fall.

Our strategists-in-residence

BRINGING TO BEAR THEIR WEALTH of experience and knowledge of small business operations and strategy, two of our veteran firefighters return this year to lend their time to help two more businesses from the region achieve further prosperity.

Gary Vaughan, owner of Appleton-based Guident Business Solutions, enters his third straight year helping entrepreneurs through our Firefighters program, while Steve Van Remortel, owner of Green Bay-based SM Advisors and a veteran from our inaugural Firefighters effort in 2011, is back for his second time.

In his everyday consulting practice, Vaughan works with his clients on improving their financial outlook by gradually building owner equity in the business. He believes business owners need to be stewards of their financial documents, using balance sheets, profit and loss statements and cash flow statements as roadmaps for guiding the business forward. Guident Business Solutions works with its clients to ensure they're inputting the most accurate and up-to-date financial information they have into their accounting software so that their financial documents don't lead them off course.

"Everything in a business boils down to a financial decision," Vaughan said. "That's how we perceive it."

Many of the growth challenges small businesses face stem from cash flow, Vaughan said. He helps business owners restructure their finances so they have available cash flow to maintain regular day-to-day operations while still keeping long-term financial goals in perspective.

During B2B's inaugural Firefighters of Northeast Wisconsin in 2011, Vaughan helped Appleton-based Action Painting & Carpet Care successfully organize its bookkeeping, take control of its finances, objectively define human resources practices

and procedures, and help the owners reduce their own stress and sleep better at night. In 2012, Vaughan returned to help Bridal Elegance & Formalwear of Kaukauna restructure its inventory, change over its bookkeeping software to a platform more appropriate for the business, and obtain financing to purchase its first company-owned van.

Van Remortel launched SM Advisors in 1999 with the notion that strategic management – hence the "SM" in the name of his firm – needs to be a critical part of moving any business forward successfully. Throughout his career Van Remortel has completed more than 500 strategic planning efforts in more than 250 businesses across the country, guiding each to develop a differentiated strategy that builds upon a skill-set aligned team to execute that strategy.

As a global thought leader on strategic planning and talent management, Van Remortel has built quite a reputation for himself nationally and particularly in northeast Wisconsin for his proprietary Stop Selling Vanilla Ice Cream process (www.stopsellingvanillaicecream.com) which he uses with clients to develop a differentiated strategy. He's authored an award-winning book by the same title which was released in fall 2012. His regular electronic newsletter, The Scoop, is available at no cost on his web site.

Van Remortel also participated as a consultant in our inaugural Firefighters event in 2011, helping partners from Green Bay's IT Connexx and DVM Connexx successfully sever operations into two distinctly independent companies. He stepped back from Firefighters last year to ready his book for publication, though SM Advisors still participated by lending the services of Mike Thuecks to consult with Caramel Crisp & Café in downtown Oshkosh.

The consultants



STEVE VAN REMORTEL

Founder, owner and president
SM Advisors,
Green Bay
www.smadvisors.com

Van Remortel launched SM Advisors in 1999 following a career either leading or owning manufacturing, distribution and service companies. He holds a master's degree in strategic management, as well as earned accreditation as a Certified Professional Behavioral Analyst.

SM Advisors has completed more than 500 planning processes in over 250 businesses across the country from start up companies to those with annual revenues in excess of \$4 billion. The firm focuses on the two fundamentals of business – strategy and talent – and guides organizations in developing a differentiated strategy and building a skill-set aligned team to execute the plan.

As a thought leader on strategic planning and talent management, Van Remortel has written articles for a variety of newspapers and periodicals. His award-winning book *Stop Selling Vanilla Ice Cream* was released in late 2012.

GARY VAUGHAN

Founder, owner and president
Guident Business Solutions LLC,
Appleton
www.guidentbusinesssolutions.com

Vaughan launched Guident in February 2009 after spending his entire career teaching – both in the classroom and in business. Having previously spent many years as a business owner himself, Vaughan realized many business owners lacked fundamental skills such as understanding financials, human resource practices and management skills, as examples. His organization's proprietary Guident 360° Assessment Program enables business owners to holistically address their business needs.

Vaughan has professional experience in a variety of industries, including retail, petroleum, manufacturing and academics. He is a senior adjunct instructor for Concordia University of Wisconsin; an instructor of financial analysis, budgeting and cost controls at Fox Valley Technical College; and a lecturer in economics and entrepreneurship at Lawrence University.



The next layer on the cake

THE FIRST OF OUR TWO businesses, Cake Anatomy was born nearly eight years ago by Dawn Bybee as a way of capitalizing on her passion for baking and an extension of her work for a wedding and event planning company.

Bybee previously had a career working in various management roles in the restaurant industry, and notes that experience helped set the stage for her strong customer service focus, which she considers a distinguishing hallmark of Cake Anatomy.

A baking enthusiast who woke up every morning to bake treats to take into work, Bybee moved to the Fox Valley 15 years ago, and through her work helping others plan a dream wedding, discovered limited options for brides and grooms to feed their reception guests quality desserts.

"I saw these brides were paying a lot of money, and the quality of what they were getting wasn't there," Bybee recalled.

With the encouragement of her husband, Allan, Bybee decided to start her own wedding cake business in 2005 by acquiring the assets of the former Koss Cake Creations in Green Bay. During that start-up period, she continued to work her fulltime job for the wedding and event planning agency, which allowed her company to begin outsourcing some of its cake orders to Cake Anatomy.

After maintaining the former Koss storefront location in Green Bay for a little more than a year, Bybee sought out a location more convenient to brides in both the Fox Valley

PROFILE

Company: Cake Anatomy
Owner: Dawn Bybee
Location: Kaukauna
Year started: 2005
Employees: 2
Web site: cakeanatomy.com



and the Green Bay area, settling on purchasing a commercial building on downtown Kaukauna's south side of the Fox River in 2007. The building includes five residential rental units, which Bybee and her husband operate as a separate business.

Cake Anatomy has developed a niche in its field with the distinct taste and look of its cakes.

"We're known for our moist cake and our butter cream frosting," Bybee said. Her customized, fresh-baked cakes often sport a sculpted design and boast a decorative flair with the help of her artistic daughter, Brianna Ropski.

The business has been a success, winning "Best of Weddings" recognitions from The Knot in both 2013 and 2010, as well as Bride's Choice Awards from Wedding Wire in 2013 and 2011 – both well regarded wedding resource web sites. It regularly sells cakes from Green Bay to Oshkosh, Bybee said, and the business continues to be in the black year after year, carrying no debt. Revenues, as well as profits, have been steady.



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But Cake Anatomy – like most other wedding-related businesses – struggles to generate consistent revenues through the wedding off-season, considered from the middle of November through early May. Whereas she has nine cakes scheduled for a given weekend this coming June, she only did three cakes during the entire month of December, and only one or two cakes for each of January and February. In past years, she's had to temporarily lay off her daughter from employment during the winter months until the wedding season begins to pick up again in the spring.

Cake Anatomy has been able to remain somewhat busy making cakes during slower times through its active participation in Icing Smiles, a nationwide nonprofit that provides custom celebration cakes to families impacted by the critical illness of a child. Bybee has also provided wedding cakes to returning war veterans at no charge. Both are noble causes which keep her oven hot and her mixing bowls full, but don't bring in revenue.

Meanwhile, there are weekends during the summer in which Cake Anatomy has so much demand for its cakes, Bybee has to turn away potential orders. She already has 30 wedding cakes scheduled for the entire month of June. The staff continues to be just herself and her daughter, though other family members help out with delivery and set up of the cakes at the location of the customer's wedding reception. Bybee struggles with how to grow the business without losing the personal touch that she and her daughter bring.

"How do I keep this a family business?" Bybee said. "I'd like

to be able to remain the little customer shop."

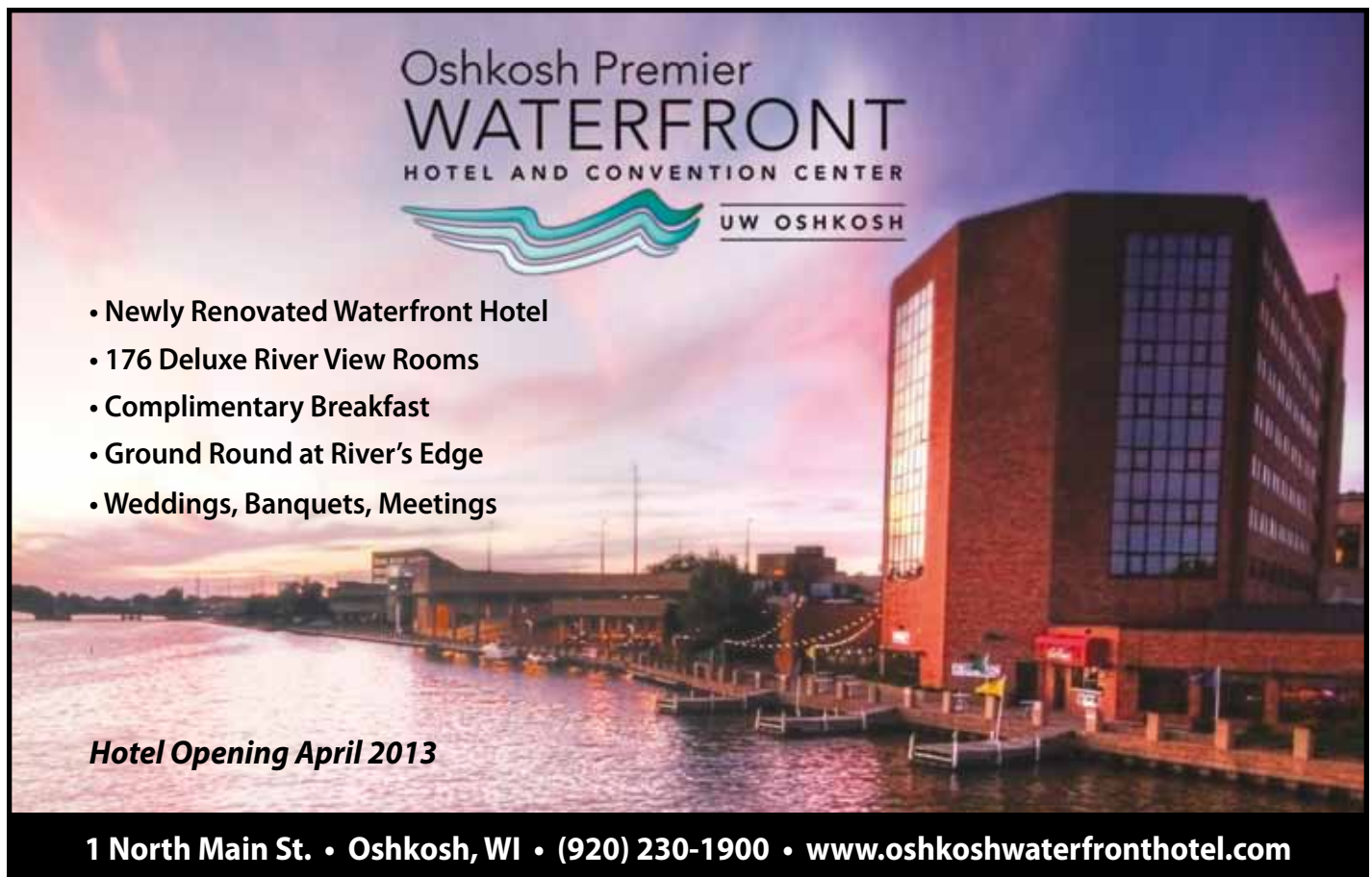
Bybee has concerns about hiring someone who might take advantage of her employment, eloping with her recipes and her customers after a short stint and developing a wedding cake business of their own. It's a practice not unheard of in the wedding cake industry, because the cost of entry into business can be low and unlicensed bakers can create cakes right from their home kitchen, Bybee said.

Bybee is additionally concerned about the price point for her products, feeling it doesn't accurately reflect the time she and her daughter put into more elaborate sculpted wedding cakes.

"That's one of my biggest issues," said Bybee, who indicated her wedding cakes can start for as little as \$290 to feed 100 guests. "People don't value your time. They see these elaborate cakes (on the hit reality television show *Cake Boss*) and want you to create something similar for fifty dollars."

Bybee has also considered branching her business out to serve a more general retail audience, hoping it can help fill the revenue and workload gaps during wedding down time. She's not quite certain how to put together a business plan for such a project, though, particularly as it pertains to staffing and pricing.

Bybee hopes Gary Vaughan and his Guident Business Solutions team can help her budget for and structure a staff, as well as help her determine appropriate and competitive price points for her products and services. She also acknowledges she doesn't know everything about running a small business, and would appreciate an unbiased perspective to identify where she isn't managing her operations as efficiently as possible.



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Building brand identity

NOW A YEAR AND A HALF into her entrepreneurial start-up, RentSmartRewards, Jo Edwards is ready to turn up the heat and change the entire process in which renters find an apartment, duplex or home.

Her web-based rental property database rewards renters with cash for signing leases on member properties, and extends those rewards for any referrals resulting in a qualifying lease. It's perhaps a groundbreaking concept. But is it possibly too foreign a concept for both residential renters as well as rental property managers at this point?

"This is a different kind of concept," Edwards explained. "We want this to be fast, fun and efficient from the renters' standpoint."

Just a decade or so ago, the obvious way to find an apartment or duplex to rent was to look in the newspaper classified ads. Today, the classified ads are about the last place a renter might look. Craigslist postings, free no-cost specialty publications at the grocery store entrance, and various connections through social media represent just the tip of the iceberg on finding a rental property. So many options make it confusing to the renter.

"That's where RentSmartRewards wants to make a difference," Edwards said.

The Green Bay-based service is designed to match available rental properties with a fitting potential renter. Renters logging into the site for the first time create an account by completing a 43-point profile. The profile helps the renter narrow down the available listed properties that fit their needs, and additionally can help property owners and managers obtain more qualified leads for prospective tenants.

"It takes time and money to do a showing," said Edwards, who worked for nine years as a property manager for one of northeast Wisconsin's largest residential rental property firms.

"As I was placing ads (for units in properties she managed), I kept thinking, 'It's just another ad. There's got to be a better way to do this,'" Edwards said.

She came up with the concept for RentSmartRewards a little more than two years ago, and left her job in September 2011 to pursue her business on a fulltime basis.

At this point, RentSmartRewards has about 30 different properties registered on its database. Property owners pay a recurring monthly fee from one of three separate pricing tiers based on the number of units they own. Paid registration allows those property managers to list as many rental units as they have available. A separate pricing model is available to property owners to pay a one-time fee at the time they sign a lease, an option attractive to those with just one or two properties who may only be looking for tenants once a year or even less often. There are no contracts, and property owners can run listings for only one month or for every month of the year.

Edwards' top priority heading into this spring renting season is getting more properties signed up, offering a larger buffet of options to potential renters in search of a new place to live. Her goal is to register 150 properties by the end of 2013. The current geographic footprint served by RentSmartRewards includes Green Bay, the Fox Cities and Madison, though property owners with rentals outside those communities have



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PROFILE

Company: RentSmartRewards
Owner: Jo Edwards
Location: Green Bay
Year started: 2011
Employees: 1
Web site: rentsmartrewards.com



listed them with Edwards' site. She plans to expand into the Milwaukee rental housing market in the spring of 2014.

Like any business that serves solely as a conduit between customer and vendor, there's a bit of a juggling act to ensure that not only do renters have enough properties to choose among, but that property owners and managers are seeing sufficient traffic from prospective tenants. To that end, Edwards' other goal is to gradually increase the number of renters registering for RentSmartRewards each month so that it's adding 400 new renters per month by the end of 2013. That's a tall order, Edwards acknowledges, particularly on a limited budget and with limited resources.

"How do I strategically bring this to market?" she asked. "That's one of my biggest challenges."

The company doesn't have any employees beside Edwards herself, though she does outsource all incoming phone inquiries to a call center. Marketing the name, the web site and the "rental matching with rewards" concept has primarily been conducted through Facebook and email campaigns during the past 18 months of RentSmartRewards' start-up phase. She recognizes it's time to step up marketing efforts to ensure a steady crop of renters is regularly registering for the site.

"We really do need to be unique to get in front of renters why we're different," Edwards said. "We're ready to get started right now and really start advertising."

Though Edwards intends to use lower-cost social media strategies as a primary means of developing the RentSmartRewards brand, her first step may be to define her uniqueness and clearly differentiate her company from the myriad of ways renters currently use to find their next home.

That's where she hopes Steve Van Remortel and his Stop Selling Vanilla Ice Cream process can offer assistance. Van Remortel is regarded as an expert in strategy and in brand differentiation, and will be working with Edwards during the next five months to lay out a plan to help grow RentSmartRewards for the long term.

In addition, the social media successes he's achieved recently promoting his book should serve Edwards as she seeks out the best approaches to use social media for brand awareness and engagement, as well as to better assess cost and value of her marketing efforts with analytical measurement tools.

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