

new  
North **B2B**

INTELLIGENT BUSINESS REPORTING FOR THE NEW NORTH

# FIRE FIGHTERS

OF NORTHEAST WISCONSIN

Local business owners tired  
of constantly putting out fires  
seek help from our experts

NO MAN IS AN ISLAND, or so the saying goes, unless that individual is a business owner.

Being a business owner can seem like a lonely proposition – around every corner there seems to be new, yet-to-experience problems and dilemmas that rear their ugly head.

Who should a business owner turn to for help? How does one stop the continual bombardment of fires that seem to break out in the business at least once or twice a day?

Expert authors of nationally best-selling books on business management teach that business owners, presidents and CEOs can't be constantly putting out fires. They need to work on the business, nurture its growth, and implement the systems and protocol to ensure the fires are minimized. When those flare ups do occur, such systems and protocol should identify other resources within the organization beside the business owner to extinguish the fire.

That's ultimately the concept behind New North B2B's inaugural Firefighters of Northeast Wisconsin initiative. During the past few months, we've solicited nominations seeking out those business owners who feel as if they're constantly burning the candle at both ends, putting out fires, spinning their wheels, but intent on finding a way to improve.

## Business 9-1-1 dispatch center

TO LEND SOME ASSISTANCE to those brave entrepreneurs, B2B secured the expertise of a couple of northeast Wisconsin's best and brightest small business consultants and strategists, who've offered to lend their time toward getting our business owners back on track, putting out the fires, and moving on to growing a prosperous enterprise.

During the course of the next three to five months, Steve Van Remortel of SM Advisors in Green Bay and Gary Vaughan of Guident Business Solutions in Appleton will donate their time

and expertise to work one-on-one with our business owners to develop a long-term plan for their business.

Along the way and wrapping up with a capstone article in our September 2011 edition, B2B will follow up with each of our business owners and their strategy coaches to learn what progress has been made, and share their ideas and strategies with readers.

What kind of help can these small businesses expect from our consultants?

Vaughan started Guident two years ago to work with clients on improving their financial outlook by building owner equity in the business.

"Everything is a financial decision – that's how we perceive it," Vaughan said.

With many of the business owners who Vaughan works with regularly, the "fires" they have in their organization typically stem from problems with cash flow. While he views financial documents as important, he'd rather his clients attempt to take a longer term perspective than getting worried about the regular performance of monthly profit and loss statements, for example.

"Otherwise, you get so caught up in 'We had a good month, we had a bad month,' and it starts to control us," Vaughan said.

Van Remortel launched SM Advisors 12 years ago with the notion that strategic management – hence the name of his firm – needs to be a critical part of moving any business forward successfully. His team has completed more than 500 planning processes in more than 250 businesses across the country, guiding each to develop a differentiated strategy and build a skill-set aligned team to execute that strategy.

As a thought leader on strategic planning and talent management, Van Remortel has been gaining prominence around the region and nationally for his proprietary Stop Selling Vanilla

## The consultants



Gary Vaughan  
Founder, owner and president  
Guident Business Solutions LLC,  
Appleton  
[www.guidentbusinesssolutions.com](http://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.

Steve Van Remortel  
Founder, owner and president  
SM Advisors,  
Green Bay  
[www.smadvisors.com](http://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 book *Stop Selling Vanilla Ice Cream* is slated for publication this coming summer 2011.

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Ice Cream process which he uses with clients to develop a differentiated strategy. A book he's authored of the same title is slated for publication this coming summer 2011.

From his viewpoint, most struggling businesses can be salvageable if they develop and effectively execute a well-planned strategy.

"The fundamentals of business are all the same," said Van Remortel. But it's the individuals running the business, and the decisions they make, that determine whether or not they'll ultimately have a profitable day.

### Extinguishing fires

Despite significant growth and a relatively dependable load of customer demand, the owners of Green Bay-based IT Connexx – as well as a sister company, DVM Connexx – are nearly six years into their business and working around the clock.

Owners Kevin Scholz and Brian O'Shaughnessy acknowledge that in order to take their company to the next level of maturity, they need to learn more discipline in reviewing their financial statements from a strategic perspective. Both partners recognize the 12-employee company has grown to a point where the technical management, financial management, and staff management has grown beyond the operational comfort that existed when it was just the two of them.

"Management as a company has become much more tactical," said Scholz, the CEO and chief operating officer for the technology services contractor.

The two partners had worked with one another in western Wisconsin during the 1990s doing IT in the veterinary industry. They became friends who kept in touch after O'Shaughnessy moved to Green Bay in 1998 to work in IT at the former American Medical Security, now United Healthcare. A few years later he went out on his own to provide contract IT assistance to small and mid-sized businesses and organizations in the Fox Valley.

In the meantime, Scholz moved to the Green Bay area as well, running his own company that provided IT services specifically to veterinary practices across the country. At the time, Scholz was spending months out of each year away from home working on large-scale projects for clients in other states. Both friends experienced a growth in demand for their services, which eventually outpaced the time each had available.

As they debated what would be the next steps in allowing their respective businesses to become more productive and more efficient, they eventually decided to merge together their own one-man-shows in 2005.

"Brian and I sketched out a plan a long time ago what we wanted and what it would take," Scholz said.

Today, both DVM Connexx, its veterinary practice IT service side, and IT Connexx, its small to mid-size company regional IT service provider, have matured much of their systems, their processes and their client base. The two are primarily run as separate companies – with Scholz giving more attention to DVM Connexx and O'Shaughnessy providing more focus to IT Connexx – yet, they share staff and they share management.

Additionally, it's still tough for them to let go of some the day-to-day "technical" aspects of the job and focus on big-picture management issues.

"When I was by myself, I wore every hat," said O'Shaughnessy,

#### PROFILE

**Company:** IT Connexx  
**Owners:** Brian O'Shaughnessy and Kevin Scholz  
**Location:** Green Bay and Appleton  
**Year started:** 2005  
**Employees:** 12

**What it does:** The firm provides urgent care – as well as disruption prevention planning – for business hardware, software and other technology needs.

**Web site:** www.itconnexx.com



who serves as president of the company. "The hardest thing for me is to hand off a problem (to one of his engineers) for a client that I know well and that I know I can take a minute and a half to solve, but it might take someone else a few hours to do."

That's especially the case in a business model that generates revenue by the hour.

"I try very hard not to be billable, but it's been a transition that's taken a couple of years," O'Shaughnessy said. "There's no doubt we both enjoy going out and personally doing the work."

The two partners hope their work with Van Remortel and SM Advisors can lead to a tactical strategy to manage and grow both of their companies within their respective markets.

### Getting back on track

The entrepreneurial spirit thrives with Ruben Contreras, who started Action Painting & Carpet Care in Appleton in 2005. In just six years he went from working three separate outside jobs to support the business he was starting into a six-employee company which provides interior and exterior painting, carpet care, snow plowing and landscaping service across the Fox Valley region, primarily to single- and multi-family residences.

But a variety of circumstances related to back taxes and a financial picture that's correctable – but right now feels as if it's out of control – are keeping Contreras from taking his company to its full potential.

After moving from Mexico to the Fox Valley 14 years ago without the ability to speak and understand English, Contreras enrolled in the English as a Second Language program at Fox Valley Technical College, and a few years later began working for a paint contractor and learned the trade. After five years of working for two different paint contractors in what Contreras learned was an unstable industry, he decided to go out on his own with the support of his wife, June.

At first, Contreras took one or two jobs here and there as they came his way. But by the end of his second year, he had resigned his other three jobs, taken fulltime to his business and even hired his first employee. From there, he steadily grew his menu of services, his customer base, his workforce, and ultimately the complexity of his business.

#### PROFILE

**Company:** Action Painting & Carpet Care  
**Owners:** Ruben and June Contreras  
**Location:** Appleton  
**Year started:** 2005  
**Employees:** 6

**What it does:** The family-owned company provides interior and exterior painting and carpet care services throughout the Fox Valley region.

**Web site:** www.actionpaintingservices.com



Today, business is much more vibrant than it was five years ago. But Contreras acknowledges a number of missteps in regard to an unintentional lack of payments made to the IRS and the state Department of Revenue. Not surprisingly, it's a mistake a number of new small business owners make – particularly in the building trades – and often leads to their eventual dissolution. But Contreras won't succumb to allowing past due tax payments to shut down his business.

"My biggest goal right now is to be straight up with the state

and federal government," Contreras said. "But right now we feel like we're adding more water to the bottle and more water to the bottle, and it just starts flowing over."

In addition, due to some past bookkeeping errors, Contreras has paid too much for his worker's compensation insurance, and as a result he's considerably overspent on his insurance budget. All six of his employees were rated as painters – which carries one of the highest rates of worker's comp coverage because they're routinely climbing ladders and scaffolding – even though some of his employees strictly clean carpets and never leave the ground.

Lastly, marketing is an area that continues to challenge Contreras. An avid networker and a well-known fixture at chamber of commerce events in the Fox Cities and the Heart of the Valley, Contreras most certainly is the public face of Action Painting. But he admits he struggles with how to effectively spend his marketing budget.

Despite the troubles in his business, his heart is in the right place. Contreras and his crew regularly donate their time to paint facilities for non-profits around the area. For his efforts, the Fox Cities YMCA recognized him as its 2011 Volunteer of the Year.

He's hoping Vaughn and Guident Business Solutions can help him lay out a road map for Action Painting to follow and get on the track to success for years to come.

"This is the first generation of many," Contreras said, echoing the storied American dream. "I hope to be able to build this up and pass it off to my kids."

