

FIREFIGHTERS OF NORTHEAST WISCONSIN 2012

**Our 2nd annual initiative helping
small business owners from the
constant effort of putting out fires**

STORY BY SEAN FITZGERALD
NEW NORTH B2B PUBLISHER

**Being a small business owner
is a lonely proposition.**

We know — we're singing to the choir.

B2B READERS ARE WROUGHT WITH THOSE WARRIORS from the front lines of the battle of commerce, not only generals in leading the sales and service of their companies' niche source of revenue, but in paying employees, determining advertising strategies, fixing I.T. issues, making coffee and cleaning toilets. Yes, being a small business owner requires a master's degree in the hard knocks of business, and there's rarely a degree or fraternity that can prepare one for the ups and downs experienced on a day-to-day basis.

While small business owners are often the masters of their own domain – be it in carpet cleaning, network troubleshooting, marketing or retail – it's rare that they're often also experts in the arts of budget management and reading profit and loss statements. Those small business owners who recognize they weren't born to be all things to all businesses – and invest the time and other resources into improving their all-around skill sets – have the greatest opportunity to continue to grow their operations for years of success.

That's the goal of our Firefighters of Northeast Wisconsin initiative: to provide a forum for those existing business owners who feel as if they're constantly putting out fires to move beyond the problem-solving phase of their business and advance into the growing and planning phase of their company.

In its inaugural year in 2011, New North B2B's Firefighters initiative helped two northeast Wisconsin businesses overcome their challenges to grow to the next level of success. IT Connexx, a Green Bay-based regional I.T. consulting firm, and its sister company, DVM Connexx – which provides I.T. solutions specifically to the veterinary industry on a national scope – were stifled by intertwined personnel, office space and internal systems confusion. Another company – Appleton-based Action

Painting & Carpet Care – suffered from a variety of financial issues due to the lack of a well-developed budget, defined policies and procedures, as well as having fallen behind on employee payroll tax payments and reporting.

To the rescue

LENDING ASSISTANCE TO THESE BUSINESS OWNERS are two of the region's leading business consultants and strategists. Both Steve Van Remortel and his team from SM Advisors in Green Bay, as well as Gary Vaughan and his team from Guident Business Solutions in Appleton, volunteered their time and expertise to help IT Connexx and Action Painting put out the fires and begin thinking about the future of their businesses.

They'll do the same this year, working one on one during the next four to five months with two small business owners from northeast Wisconsin looking for assistance turning the next corner on the development of their business. Along the way and wrapping up with a capstone article in our September 2012 edition, B2B will follow up every month with each of our business owners and their strategy coaches to gain some perspective into the progress they've made, and to share their ideas and strategies with readers.

As illustrated in his work with Action Painting a year ago, Vaughan firmly believes that every decision a business owner makes is a financial decision. He recognizes that many of the so-called "fires" owners experience in their business are often rooted in dilemmas with cash flow. Vaughn works directly with clients to use their financial documents – their monthly profit and loss statements and their balance sheets – as tools for improving their financial outlook.

Last year, Van Remortel helped the owners of IT Connexx and

The consultants



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.

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 book *Stop Selling Vanilla Ice Cream* is slated for publication later in 2012.

DVM Connexx successfully and amicably sever the conjoined organization into two separate, completely independent business operations. Firmly believing that strategic management needs to be part of successfully moving any business forward, Van Remortel and his team from SM Advisors (for “strategic management”) have completed more than 500 planning processes in more than 250 businesses across the country. In each case, he worked with those businesses to develop a differentiated strategy and build a skill-set aligned team to execute that strategy. From his perspective, many struggling firms can be salvaged if they develop and effectively execute a well-planned strategy.

Regarded as a thought leader on strategic planning and talent management, Van Remortel has grown a bit of a following around the region and nationally for his proprietary Stop Selling Vanilla 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 later in 2012.

Turning the corner to profitability

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE for LuAnn Vander Zanden and Bridal Elegance & Formalwear retail shop in downtown Kaukauna has been anything but a well-choreographed plan in running and building a business.

Despite the variety of challenges that have fallen in her lap and obstacles she’s had to clear along the way, she’s been in business for 13 years and is still driven to achieve even bigger goals with her business.

PROFILE

Company: Bridal Elegance & Formalwear
Owner: LuAnn Vander Zanden
Location: Kaukauna
Year started: 1999
Employees: 6
What it does: Retailer of bridal gowns, bridesmaid gowns, prom gowns, tuxedo rentals, shoes, bridal jewelry, wedding accessories and attendant gifts
Web site: www.valleybridalelegance.com
www.valleytuxedos.com



“I’m hoping to have a record-breaking year this year where I can take a vacation, get a new car, and not have to keep putting money back into the business,” Vander Zanden said. “The drive is there, and I’d eventually like to have a second store.”

The path to business ownership wasn’t exactly the journey she set out on earlier in life during her 23-year career as a senior business analyst with Thrivent Financial for Lutherans in Appleton and its forerunner, Aid Associations for Lutherans.

A good friend who was a partner in a bridal shop in Kaukauna encouraged Vander Zanden to help out on a part time basis on weekends, evenings and special bridal shows. When her

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friend's partner suddenly disappeared and inexplicably abandoned the business, Vander Zanden and her friend decided to open a bridal shop business of their own.

They searched for a building, and in May 1999 opened Bridal Elegance in its current location in downtown Kaukauna with 12 dresses and five employees. Vander Zanden would continue her fulltime job at AAL and work in the shop evenings and weekends, while her friend and now-business partner would run the day-to-day operations of the store.

The venture appeared to be running smoothly for more than five years until Vander Zanden's partner approached her in late 2004 and said she was leaving the business within a week. Vander Zanden scrambled to learn how to do payroll, learn the nuances of the bookkeeping software, figure out the employee scheduling and develop relationships with lenders and vendors.

It was quite a change of pace – Vander Zanden had been the “hands-off” of the two partners since the outset of Bridal Elegance, and finally found herself thrust into the role as the sole owner and operator. The buck stopped with her and no one else. She persevered, and continued to work fulltime at Thri-vent until March 2005, when Vander Zanden finally stretched her schedule too thin that she needed to resign in order to salvage the investment in her business.

In the months that followed her partner's departure, Vander Zanden would learn bills weren't being paid to vendors, payroll taxes and associated reporting wasn't made to the IRS, and funds were missing from certain cash accounts in the business.

“It was a struggle at the time,” Vander Zanden said. “We've come a long way since then.”

Indeed she has, having not only kept Bridal Elegance going – but growing – all the while cleaning up a majority of the financial and tax issues that hindered the company during the past eight years.

She now boasts an inventory of more than 350 bridal gowns, an even greater amount of bridesmaid gowns, mother-of-the-bride/groom dresses, a second floor dedicated to prom gowns, a tuxedo-rental enterprise and a full line of bridal and wedding accessories. It's a one-stop-shop for betrothed couples and their families, and the six employee-staff at Bridal Elegance is as professional as they come.



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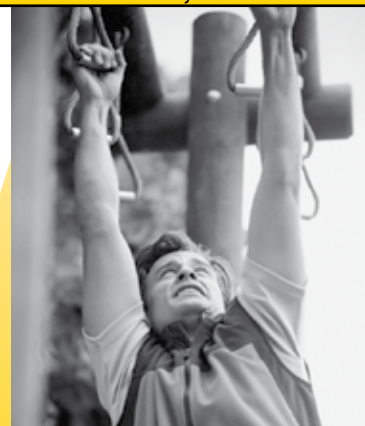
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But she still faces additional complications.

Vander Zanden owns the downtown Kaukauna building which houses her business, and it requires a substantial amount of time, work and money. The historic 110-year-old building certainly preserves a good deal of traditional charm that suits her wedding and formal wear business, but the trade-off has been a host of unpredictable and often costly repairs.

In the months that followed her partner's departure, Vander Zanden would learn bills weren't being paid to vendors...and funds were missing from certain cash accounts.

During the past six years, she's put on a new commercial-grade roof, replaced exterior windows on the second floor, installed a new heating and cooling system, and repaired the exterior walls where brick began to fall.

Vander Zanden said she struggles with decisions about where and how to advertise her business, how much to spend, and how to determine if she's receiving a return on her marketing investment.

She also does little to project and plan her expenses in advance, both in the short-term as well as throughout the year.

"I feel I don't have a grasp on how to figure out a budget,"

she said. "I'd like some training in that regard."

Lastly, while Vander Zanden has grown the business and taken care of correcting its financial obligations and building maintenance, she's done so at the expense of herself and her family – she hasn't taken a paycheck since the business opened. Her children have grown up and entered college, and her supportive husband has been carrying most of the family's financial responsibilities.

Vander Zanden said she's driving a 1997 Chrysler. She's ready for a new car. She'd like to take a vacation this year, and said it's about time she takes a paycheck. She's hoping Vaughan and his team from Guident Business Solutions can help her learn to budget, spend her marketing dollars more effectively, and develop a more predictable financial stability.

Capitalizing on growth opportunities

CARAMEL CRISP & CAFÉ'S CHANDA ANDERSON has consistently built up her downtown Oshkosh destination since opening it four years ago.

Anderson took a textbook approach to launching her company, writing a well-thought out business plan, financing nearly all of her capital costs with her own savings or with operating revenues along the way, and climbing the ladder of business success slowly, waiting to become sure-footed on each wrung she climbs onto before advancing to the next. Like Vander Zanden, Anderson has also never taken a paycheck since starting her business – not because she hasn't been able to do so – but simply because she's chosen not to, rather



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PROFILE

Company: Caramel Crisp & Café
Owner: Chanda Anderson
Location: Oshkosh
Year started: 2008
Employees: 10
What it does: Retailer of caramel corn, flavored popcorn, café, bakery, ice cream parlor and gift shop
Web site: www.caramelcrispcafe.com



taking any earnings after all the rest of her expenses and returning those proceeds back into the business.

Caramel Crisp had been an institution in downtown Oshkosh since 1933, but had closed and reopened on a few occasions under a handful of different owners. Anderson's own mother had purchased Caramel Crisp 25 years ago, and eventually closed it earlier last decade.

Anderson reopened the business in 2008 as a place to quell a sweet tooth with a take-home or gift bag of flavored popcorn, as well as providing a café with a light menu of sandwiches and soups. It's since evolved into a bakery, ice cream parlor and gift shop, and is regarded as one of the downtown's leading destinations for a mid-afternoon treat, boasting some of the most creative flavors of warm, fresh cookies. Her gift tins of flavored popcorn have evolved into popular holiday season presents, so much so, that she and another employee were often running ragged in a cramped gift prep area to fill orders.

"It was incredible that I was that lucky during the holiday season last year, and that we continue to be so lucky," Anderson said.

An ongoing expansion will allow Caramel Crisp more space for its gift shop as well as for preparing gift tins and gift bags of confections.

But Anderson faces other barriers to her business reaching its full potential. With limited capabilities in her kitchen, her café's menu offerings have been limited, but are a staple for many during the lunch hour. She wonders to what degree she

could capture more of the breakfast market by expanding her menu during the morning hours.

"If I could even grow my morning business by 10 percent, I'd be happy," she said.

On the flip side, Anderson has debated expanding her hours of operation in the other direction, extending her early evening closing time by providing an upscale dessert and wine bar as a nightcap destination for patrons of many of the arts and entertainment events occurring in downtown Oshkosh during the evening. But such a decision would accompany a host of other issues – extended staffing, obtaining a liquor license, and concerns about clashing with the unsavory side of nightlife drunkenness.

She's also considered expanding into a line of artisan breads, a way of generating greater efficiency from her bakery which sits idle at least 16 hours each day.

Lastly, Anderson goes back and forth about opening a second location of Caramel Crisp & Café. The business model is ripe to be replicated, and she's been courted by downtown organizations across the region to open her "next" location in their community, but Anderson has been reluctant, noting it would take even more time from her already busy schedule. Currently she's not looking to expand, and turned down an opportunity to open a second location in The Outlet Shoppes at Oshkosh last holiday season.

Anderson is hoping Van Remortel and his team at SM Advisors can help her create a strategy for managing the growth of her Caramel Crisp's offering without overwhelming herself or her customers.

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