



Ask SCORE for Business Advice

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Column Title: Advisory Boards by Tina Dettman-Bielefeldt

Most people like to help other people. We find that at SCORE where experienced business professionals volunteer their time to offer advice. This is one way of getting help. But, what if your business could benefit from regular input? Many entrepreneurs find the solution in the establishment of an advisory board

Mark Semrau, owner of *LaJava, A Roasting House*, in Green Bay, sees the advantage of using a board. He said, "I decided to work with an advisory board to help with reality checks. Sometimes when you look at a new idea or adventure you get very excited or wrapped up in it or too close to it and it's easy to over look something. When you have a couple other people looking at it from different angles they may be able to see something you're over looking or do not want to see."

Semrau, who opened his business in August 2002, had plenty of experience. He and his wife both came out of the customer service industry and had strong retail experience. In pursuing a business, he worked with Urban Hope, wrote a business plan, and cautiously moved forward. Despite laying solid groundwork, he saw the advantage to getting diverse opinions.

Semrau's board has five members including himself and his wife. The other members were asked to participate because of their experience as active or retired business owners in the retail, commercial or financial area. "I asked people whose opinion I valued and who had been successful in their business ventures," he noted.

The informal board meets twice a year unless issues come up that require input. Semrau occasionally emails members and might request comments on a particular problem or opportunity. He explained, "I put this structure in place to help see the bigger picture. You can get caught up in an idea and just want it to work even if the odds are stacked against you. That's what the other members help point out."

These reality checks keep Semrau grounded and allow for well thought out growth. He focuses on making his current business strong and unique. He roasts coffee on site so that customers get coffee that is fresh. In addition, he carries 80 bulk teas and tries to bring in items that aren't found in other stores. The board assists with sales and marketing ideas, and growth plans.

“We have talked about expansion,” Semrau noted. “We are currently exploring different options which will be put in front of the board.”

Semrau knows that his board may not be enthused about all his ideas, but he considers that a good thing. Being as close as he is to the business, the board provides a view from the outside. There are other positive factors including minimizing risk and feeling more secure in your decisions. Then, there’s that one other major benefit.

Semrau notes, “I think it cuts down on the number of sleepless nights.”

If you have business questions, contact the Green Bay Chapter of SCORE. Visit www.greenbayscore.org or call Cindy Gokey at 920-496-8930 for information.

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