



Ask SCORE for Business Advice

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Business Thrives in a Growing Industry

Lew Hinnendael looks up as the door to his Cellular Systems store opens. “Hello, Paul,” he says. “How’s that Motorola phone working for you?”

Chances are that Hinnendael will greet the next customer by name, also. He has a gift for remembering names and telephones, and along with his staff, provides personal attention to every customer. Despite being in an economic downturn, Hinnendael has seen steady growth since opening his first store about 18 years ago. The exceptional service is a major reason, but it also helps to have a great product in a thriving industry.

“People will do without a lot of things before they’ll do without their cell phones,” Hinnendael explained. “They will make the car go longer or move to a smaller house, but their telephone is the most important device they can carry. I know of customers who live in their vehicles, but still have a cell phone. It’s their lifeline.”

Most people consider cell phones as dispensable as food. Having opened his business when cellular phones were boxy systems installed in a vehicle, Hinnendael has seen the industry change from one that reached a select group of mostly businessmen to one that reaches all ages and economic levels.

Hinnendael noted, “We have folks that are disabled, prepaid customers, men, women, young, old. There is no particular group that doesn’t want a phone.”

He was installing landlines for a telephone company when he was approached by Pat Riordan, CEO of Cellcom, in 1992 and asked if he would be interested in a dealership. Hinnendael talked to his uncle, an entrepreneur and mentor, and was encouraged to proceed. Hinnendael visited SCORE, wrote a business plan, obtained financing, hired an attorney and accountant, and leased a location. All in about four months.

“I was inspired by my uncle and looked to him for advice. We came from a middle class family and he was the first in our family to own and succeed in a business,” Hinnendael said.

His first location opened at 2130 Main Street, Green Bay. He has since added locations at 1845 and 11880 Velp Avenue and feels like this is the right number. His time is stretched and hours long (60 to 70 hours per week) and he wants to make sure he can be personally involved in this continually evolving industry.

“With the new technology, more people feel like they need to have the internet in the palm of their hand and the smart phones are the largest growing category. Younger people buy it as a lifestyle device,” Hinnendael explained.

Sales are increasing, but he notes that customers are very aware of the economy and some are putting off a new telephone purchase or looking at cutting out some of the extra services. Still, with the recent addition of wireless service in rural areas, and new products coming on the market frequently, Hinnendael projects a record year.

If you'd like to learn more about starting a business, 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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