



SCORE column: Serial entrepreneur learns from mistakes

Carpet cleaning, independent [insurance](#) sales, a travel agency, door-to-door advertising, legal plans and ID theft protection. Robert Jahnke's list of businesses clearly defines him as a serial entrepreneur.

Now the owner of Top Hat Marketing and a Green Bay SCORE volunteer, Jahnke has started, sold, closed and evolved [businesses](#). The amazing thing is that most of the businesses were started while he worked full time as a correctional officer.

"I always wanted to escape jail by starting my own business," he joked. "My goal my whole [life](#) was to work at my businesses. The biggest thing is the freedom. I can make my own decisions and it isn't a job; I can do what I want. Last night, I was up until 2 a.m. and had an early meeting, but during the day, I might be golfing."

His first business started in 1982 with the creation of Jahnke Carpet Cleaning. He would go to his full-time job and do jobs after work and on weekends. The business evolved and became White Glove Carpet Cleaning. Jahnke sought to develop a [strong](#) client base by offering superior service, and while that did bring repeat business, he learned what he considers his most important lesson.

"My biggest mistake was not following up during those first years in [business](#). It was about eight years before I started tracking clients, and creating a value for the business," Jahnke noted.

He found success with door-to-door marketing. When he put his business card in doors, he averaged one job for every 100 stops. Doing a few hundred a day meant several jobs. Once he had the jobs, he provided excellent work, put the person's name in a tickler file, and, by making routine calls, saw the business grow. It was sold in 1993.

During this time, Jahnke started two new businesses — an independent [insurance agency](#) and travel agency. Both businesses reinforced his belief in follow-up. "In insurance, I learned a lot from the training about how to sell," he said. "I found that 90 percent of my sales were made on follow-up."

In the early 1990s, he started Ads for You, a door-to-door advertising company. In 1996, he sold it to the Green Bay News-Chronicle and continued as manager. In 2001, he started Top Hat Marketing in addition to selling prepaid legal and ID theft [protection](#) services.

Similar to most serial entrepreneurs, Jahnke said that even though he loves his current business, he is always looking for that new niche. He is in a position where he can volunteer for SCORE, continue with the HBBA (Helping Businesses Build Assets) networking group of which he is a co-founder, and help other entrepreneurs.

"I've learned that nothing is a failure," he said. "Learn from your mistakes and use that in your next business. Keep learning, and ask people who are successful what their secrets are because they've probably been there."

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