

# PROVIDENCE BUSINESS NEWS

YOUR LOCAL SOURCE FOR BUSINESS NEWS IN SOUTHERN NEW ENGLAND

## Seven steps to peak small-business performance

### Setting clear guidelines helps keep firm on track

While companies often create a plan to finance their business, sell and market their products/services, arrange for office space and technology, and hire employees, most small business owners also have a vision of creating the model workplace and customer/client experience.



**GUEST  
COLUMN**  
**Don Nokes**

Those well-meaning ideals frequently get put on the back burner when the fires begin. Whether it's frenzied troubleshooting, managing your hectic human resources or dealing with the quagmire of

office administration, small business owners are hard-pressed to stay true to their visions.

Here are a few guiding principles to consider when faced with the countless challenges to small business success:

- Forge strong personal relationships with your customers and business partners, based on honesty and integrity at every turn.

- Make your decisions based on the long term. A quick sale or some extra margin can cost you in the long run. Genuine interest and a desire to understand and work with people add another dimension to the job. Use technology tools and contact databases to log information about your customers' business anniversaries, outside interests, etc. Develop relationships that enable you to truly connect with people.

- Hire a team of highly competent and motivated professionals with the same high standards you possess. Don't compromise.

In today's competitive business marketplace, it is difficult to tell whether a job applicant has the skills, personality and motivation to be a successful part of

your team. Don't be afraid to conduct background checks, administer personality profiles and chat with references. A savvy mentor once advised me to narrow down any job search to three people, and bring them all back three times. Then, trust your gut instincts.

- Create and implement individual development plans to ensure the personal happiness and professional success of each employee.

This is a top priority for us, because our employees are the cornerstones of our business. Craft individual development plans together with your employees, to ensure a win-win relationship. Support and fund life-long-learning opportunities, aligning your business goals with individuals' aspirations. Involve them in decision-making, reward their business-building efforts all year round (not just at the holidays or year's end) and celebrate their successes.

- Solve your customers' big-picture challenges, not merely their immediate needs. Be budget-conscious as you move clients from what they need now to where they want to go.

Once you become a trusted business partner for your customers, they will turn to you every time. There will always be customers and clients who need more than they can afford. Keeping up with the latest office technology, for instance, can be daunting. Identify their priorities and implement the solutions over time, maintaining the integrity of their budget.

- Don't be afraid of competition. Learn to thrive on it, and seek out opportunities to cooperate with competitors rather than compete with them.

Some small businesses think they are unique and have no competition. Others are savvy enough to realize that almost everyone may be a competitor. Competition keeps you on your toes. Cooperating with people in your same skill area often

leads to benefits for all. Have lunch together and share your problem-solving strategies.

- Give back to your community by sharing your time and expertise in charitable and civic endeavors where you can make a difference.

Some businesses are afraid to say no to a charitable request. At NetCenergy, we have made the decision to team up with a few charitable organizations – San Miguel School, Make-A-Wish Foundation – to give our time and products in a way that really makes a difference. While there are myriad worthwhile charities, becoming intimately involved with a few offers greater personal reward.

- Embrace networking in a meaningful way to establish and reinforce your connections. Actively work your memberships to garner return on your investment.

Chambers of Commerce and business-leads groups are often effective networking vehicles. However, we all know that you get out of these organizations only what you put into them. Sign up for e-mail alerts in advance of events and insert recurring meetings in your electronic calendar. Learn to be a good listener; hone your elevator pitch and seek the right business affiliations for your timetable and target audience.

Following these guidelines, as well as others that you may develop based on your own business needs, will allow you to reach peak performance even while dealing with the dilemma of the day. ■

**Once you  
become a  
trusted business  
partner for your  
customers, they  
will turn to you  
every time.**

*Don Nokes is president of Warwick-based NetCenergy, the Citizens Bank 2006 Peak Performance Award winner that provides computer network design, installation and support to companies in the health care, banking and finance, sports and entertainment, and e-commerce industries.*