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Staying positive makes a difference for executive  
Out of a layoff came opportunity  
The Business Journal of Milwaukee - by Corrinne Hess

Scott Paulus

Tom Steepy . . . “You can hear it a million times, but until you are a small business owner, you just can't fully understand the commitment of hours.”

View Larger When Tom Steepy was laid off in 2007 after nearly 30 years in manufacturing, he looked at it as his chance to pursue a life-long dream of owning his own business.

Now two years into it, his Signs Now franchise in Brookfield is thriving.

Steepy, 52, has seen sales increase more than 400 percent in December 2008 over December 2007. In March he hired a full-time salesperson to focus on business development.

The creation of that position will allow Steepy to work on his business instead of working in his business, he said.

For now, however, it is unlikely that the new hire, Todd Schumell, will give Steepy any more free time, which is something he hasn't had since he bought the 17-year-old Signs Now franchise from its previous owner in late 2007.

“You can hear it a million times, but until you are a small business owner, you just can't fully understand the commitment of hours,” says Steepy, who lives in Richfield with his wife, Dolly. “Some of the most time-consuming things are important to the business, but don't directly impact the customers. That is something I wasn't expecting.”

A family's history

It's not that Steepy was being naive about the demands of a small business owner when he took over. His father owned a construction company in New Jersey and both his sister and brother are small business owners.

Being familiar with the needs of small business owners has enabled Steepy to thrive as one. It also has him reaching out to other entrepreneurs who may be struggling.

“I understand when money is tight,” Steepy says. “And when I have a customer tell me they would love to (use Signs Now services), but they just don't have enough money, I understand that, too.”

Signs Now produces interior and exterior graphics, vehicle banners, retail signage and marketing materials for industries including construction, medical and real estate. As a business, its mission is to help other businesses grow.

Steepey has tried to stay positive about the economy. He thinks President Barack Obama's message of change and hope will make other business owners more optimistic.

“Perception is reality,” Steepey says. “Business owners that are willing to keep moving forward and make changes are going to be so far ahead of those who panic and do nothing.”

Steepey is so passionate about keeping other business owners optimistic that he has partnered with the business coaching franchise ActionCoach to hold free monthly seminars, titled “Kicking the Economy,” for local business owners.

So far, about 30 people have attended each of two seminars. The third will be held in Elm Grove at 8 a.m. May 29.

“I don't have all the answers by any stretch of the imagination,” he says. “But if one tip is able to help one business owner, I think it's worth it.”

#### Business decision

Marty Barnes, owner of The Entrepreneur's Source, a Milwaukee franchise that helps people explore business ownership, has been impressed with Steepey's immediate ability to adapt as a small business owner.

Barnes, who knew Steepey through a Harley-Davidson owner's group, helped Steepey figure out what type of business made sense for him.

After looking at about two dozen new and existing companies, Steepey settled on Signs Now.

“Tom (Steepey) did a real good job of doing his due diligence,” Barnes says. “Some people struggle to get a feel for what (owning a business) is all about. I think Tom is just made for this.”

Steepey won the Signs Now International Sales Growth Award in December from the company's national headquarters in Sarasota, Fla., after Steepey's sales increased 434.3 percent in December 2008 over December 2007.

The franchise currently has about 1,000 active customers.

The store is on Blue Mound Road in Brookfield at the back end of a shopping center. Steepey has 3,000 square feet, of which a limited amount of space is his office.

Large printers, a design table and displays of the work Signs Now can do take up most of the space. And the smell and noise from the printers are unmistakable.

“I love that noise,” Steepey says. “That's production. That's work. If the printers are going, that's a good thing.”

**SMALL BUSINESS**

In 2008, The Business Journal began following four small businesses, periodically providing updates on how they're doing in the current economy. Tom Steepy is one of those business owners.

To read previous installments, go to the links below:

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