

The Power of Business Mentoring Reaches

By Erika Howland

Marketing, cash flow concerns, growth projections...these are just a few of MANY reasons why a woman business owner in Erie County might seek the help of ATHENA PowerLink. And for the first time, more women-owned businesses are going to receive help than ever before.

Now in its 11th year, ATHENA PowerLink has been "linking" women business owners with a panel of local business professionals in an attempt to advise participants on a variety of topics. The Advisory Panel works with the business owner for one year, free of charge. The panel, which can include everyone from lawyers and bankers to accountants and marketing professionals, help each woman with her individual needs to help grow her business. As the third city in the nation to start this volunteer program, already ATHENA PowerLink has helped 16 women-owned businesses.

"I realized about 13 years ago, based on attendance at different business events that many women were eager to get into or grow a business but they found there was a lack of resources," says Linda Stevenson, governing board chair for ATHENA PowerLink. "Working with small businesses and women in particular, I knew we were lacking a program of this caliber in our community, and wanted to change that."

Since its inception the program has gradually grown with an increase in women-owned businesses and their desire to grow to the next level. That growth, in combination with the response from business professionals in the community eager to volunteer their expertise, validated the governing body's decision to award three women-owned businesses an ATHENA PowerLink Advisory Panel of Business Professionals for 2010.

"The program has really taken off," exclaims Stevenson. "We're lucky to have so many successful business professionals in our community wanting to pay it forward."

"It also is good business practice to want to help other businesses to grow," she added.

And the success is in the numbers. According ATHENA International, on average businesses realize an 88% increase in sales and 37% increase in business growth income as a result of the mentoring program.

This year 10 applications were submitted locally. The three businesses chosen were: Milestones Quality Children's Consignment, Glass Growers Gallery, and FASTSIGNS.

Milestones Quality Children's Consignment

On her third career venture, Claudine Thiem has found her niche and the owner of this consignment shop for nearly five years is now ready for some outside help.

Her business has moved three times and recently found a home in a 5,200-square foot store on West Lake Road. And while Thiem is excited to grow the business, that growth presents a new set of challenges.

"Things have been going well," explains Thiem. "We have moved and added payroll with 10 part-time employees but now I've hit a point where the common sense and analytical nature I have with a math background can only take me so far."

Her hope is with help from other business professionals, she will be able to better determine the best course of action to help grow her business.

"I am not a business major," Thiem laughs. "I have taken this as far as I can go with my expertise alone. I am hoping this will be a crash course in getting the direction I need without having to go back to business school."



Glass Growers Gallery, Inc.

For 35 years, people from all over the world have picked up a little piece of Erie at Glass Growers Gallery, Inc.

Since the beginning, Deborah Vahanian has been running the unique must-stop shop for tourists and residents alike. Business is good says Vahanian, but it could be more convenient.



"We meet people from all over the world due to our location by the Art Museum and when they leave they want to stay in touch to see what's new and they do that through our website," Vahanian says. "It's worked well, but now it's time to explore new heights."

Vahanian admits she sought out ATHENA PowerLink for help in the one area she doesn't know enough about: the Internet.

"I would like to get the gallery to the next level and incorporate the internet and all its technologies and opportunities, she says. "I want to explore social media and be able to sell our merchandise to customers all over."

Vahanian says even with years of experience owning a business, it never hurts to run your ideas past other people and figure out if you need to change what you are doing, or perhaps stop and take another direction.

"It can be easy to lose focus," she says. "When you own a small business, you get interrupted daily and your energy is diverted so my hope is this Advisory Panel will say to me stop, focus on this particular area and get this into our daily routine."

New Heights

FASTSIGNS

A sign maker in the Erie community for nearly two decades, Naomi Stutzman bought the FASTSIGNS franchise in 2007. Formerly Al's Sign Service, Stutzman's business was growing and she felt going with the franchise would offer more support to take things to the next level.

Currently FASTSIGNS has six full-time employees, but is expecting to add two more this year.

Stutzman says she decided to go through the ATHENA PowerLink application process after talking with other business owners.

"I've heard so many good things about ATHENA and how past recipients of the Advisory Panel have benefited," she said.

And with just the application, Stutzman says her business has already benefited.

"The application was an eye-opener," explains Stutzman. "The learning really starts right there as you realize things about your own business and what people would ask you based on the information you have to fill-out."

Stutzman says now that she's been awarded her own Advisory Panel she is ready to get right to work. She would like help with financial analysis, marketing ideas and how to pursue larger projects particularly in the government sector.

"The local expertise will help me to better learn how to do business in Erie and in Pennsylvania and how to keep moving forward in tough times... that is really what I need right now," explains Stutzman. "I am looking forward to taking a step back, looking at the business and having the mentors to help keep me focused."



FASTSIGNS



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