

Six things to boost business in tough times

It seems lately we are hearing some promising, albeit limiting, news about our economic situation. Whether that's true or not, we still have to move ahead. This is a wonderful opportunity to do things differently.

Take a real look at your business model. Are you doing things the same as you have always done them? Are you selling the same way, prospecting the same way, proposing business the same way?



ON SALES

GRETTA SCHULZ

Something's got to give. The opportunity we have to take advantage of the environment is exciting. Don't let your fear of the future hinder what you could be doing now to really make some positive changes in your business. I have laid out six things I think will help you get focused and be creative.

- Look inside first. Focus on what you have. Look at your customer base. Today is the perfect opportunity to find additional value you can bring to the relationship. I don't mean discounting or new products and services. What I do mean is that you should see what you can do for them outside of the client/provider relationship. For example, if they are looking for a bookkeeper, ask around to see if you know someone. If there is a particular person in the community you think they should know, set up a lunch for the three of you. Things outside of the normal business exchange are what we all need now. Reach out and see what you can do.

- Analyze what you have. Organize your clients, preferably by industry. Look at what each needs, what group is growing, which is down. Trends will come to the surface if you look for them. Once you have recognized some things, address your products and services accordingly.

- Get creative in your marketing. Look at new ways to market your business. If traditional advertising is out of your budget, there are online options. This is a great way to keep in front of your demographic of customers, and keep some consistency in your advertising and your message. I worry about people who decide to pull advertising altogether. What message is that sending?

- Build strategic alliances. Look at associated businesses. For example, if you are a financial adviser, look for the local CPA and estate-planning attorney. Once you have identified them, make a plan to get together to share what you are really looking for, and see how you can help each other. Now, more than ever, getting referrals is huge. There is business out there, but you need to look harder to find it. That means asking others for introductions and doing some introductions yourself.

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Heading the signs

Entrepreneur sees a bright future for his sign-making firm

BY STEVE IVEY THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

GREENSBORO — Matt Hannam describes his time toiling in the basement of a county mental health office as being in a business incubator of sorts.

He was working in information technology, as a systems administrator for Guilford County, but he and several colleagues frequently talked about starting their own businesses.

Hannam says a handful of businesses have sprung up from those would-be entrepreneurs, including his Bravo Signs, which he founded four years ago and just moved into a more visible — and strategic — location at Benjamin Parkway and Battleground Avenue in Greensboro.

"Everybody down there was trying to make their break," Hannam says of those days with the county. "It was hard work, but people naturally want to be challenged and do something that's engaging and fun."

Actually, the sign business wasn't Hannam's first thought as a startup. He and his wife, Whitney, are avid sailers, and he thought he might earn a living making difficult-to-find sails for fiberglass boats that were built back in the 1970s.

But he quickly realized the niche market for such a product might be too small.

"Sailboats are cool," Hannam says in his laid-back tone. "But I didn't know if that was going to pay the bills."

He had already invested in some basic equipment for the sail-making venture, namely a machine he describes as looking like a giant air hockey table with a mechanical arm attached to cut out intricate curves and shapes from canvas and other material. It's actually the same machinery

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JULIE KNIGHT/THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Matt Hannam, owner of Bravo Signs, recently moved his four-year-old firm to a new location in Greensboro on Benjamin Parkway.

MOVING UP

Name: Chris Shelton

New position: Case manager, Family Promise of Forsyth County, Kernersville



Shelton

Thoughts on your new position: With the support of the community, I'm looking forward to keeping homeless families together and helping them find jobs and affordable housing.

Career advice: Don't be afraid to admit a mistake and then learn from it.

First job: Part-time telephone operator for

Southern Bell.

Most influential teacher: My 10th grade guidance counselor at Grimsley High School (Greensboro) who advised me not to always try what is easy.

Last book read: "Tuesdays with Morrie," by Mitch Albom

Person(s) I would like to meet: Bill and Melinda Gates

Where was your last vacation: Wilmington

Favorite film: "The Godfather"

Ideal dinner party would include: A family meal with my husband, daughter and grandson.

Lesson you learned the hard way: You cannot make others do anything they do not want to do.

How do you generate new ideas: I identify the needs and the resources necessary to meet those needs, research what is already being done, and then I think outside the box.

What two items would you save from a burning house? My eyeglasses and wallet! Then get out!

Best course taken in college: Psychology, Winston-Salem State University

Most meaningful volunteer activity: Tutoring middle school youth this summer at my church.

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SMALL BUSINESS

BRAVO SIGNS: *Sign maker has carved a niche by providing signs for commercial real estate brokers*

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used in several fields, including making certain types of signs and banners.

So Hannam, who was an art minor while earning a bachelor's degree in computer science at Gardner-Webb University, changed course.

He knew he wanted to stay in Greensboro, but he couldn't afford the average \$200,000 that's required to purchase a sign company franchise. And he didn't want to dive right in without first learning the background of the industry. Local opportunities for apprenticeships were scarce; business owners weren't exactly eager to train another competitor.

So he found a sign company in Virginia willing to let him intern — with no pay — for six months. In that time, he learned about the products, developed a business plan and got a close look at marketing techniques.

"Those six months were pretty lean, but it was a great education," Hannam says.

Today, Bravo Signs has eight employees and makes all kinds of products — banners, three-dimensional signs, trade show displays, lighted signs, vehicle graphics, digital prints and monument signage.

A 'geeky place'

Just the same, Hannam hasn't abandoned his IT background completely. Instead, he's tried to use it as a competitive advantage.

He says he entered the business at a time when more technology, such as wide-format printers and computer numerical controlled routers — which automate the process of cutting complex shapes — was just coming to market.

"We were right on the front end of that," Hannam says. "A lot of other companies were still working with equipment that was popular in the 1990s. But we got all the gear you needed to do the work quickly and the way it should be done."

Staying up-to-date technologically can be costly — Hannam estimates his shop has about \$125,000 in equipment. Much of that has been financed with the help of Suntrust Banks Inc. in Greensboro, which Hannam says has been helpful and flexible in helping him grow.

"Suntrust and I, we roll deep," Hannam says of his community banking relationship, key to financing that equipment.

Hannam says one of the other challenges of the business is navigating all the



A Bravo Signs employee puts the finishing touches on the company's sign at its new location on Battleground Avenue in Greensboro.

JULIE KNIGHT/THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

information that one project can require.

For example, if a retailer orders a sign, it's likely going to come with restrictions from a property manager, city ordinances and permitting specifications, even Department of Transportation standards depending on where the sign will be. All those top off the detailed requests of the customer.

So Hannam has developed computerized records for every job that lists any of those special requirements, any artwork to be included, an updated timeline on where the project stands in the manufacturing process, who's overseeing the project and what the next step will be.

On one recent day, Bravo Signs' computer system listed such information for 62 jobs that were in the works.

"It's just a huge amount of information," Hannam says. "The only way to do it is to be organized. It's a pretty geeky place over here. My IT background has helped a ton."

Hannam says he's also try to focus on the service side of the business.

"Every product we sell is custom," he says. "We make signs, but really we're a service company. Most of the work is about ideas and concepts, figuring out what the customer wants to accomplish and turning it into something that benefits them."

Jim Gouge, owner of International Minute Press in Greensboro, says that ethic has kept Bravo Signs competitive in the market.

"I moved my location about eight months ago and had Matt do all the signage," Gouge says. "I had the confidence he would do it right, because they always deliver. And I've heard his other clients

say the same thing. In this type of business, you wouldn't make it if you couldn't build those relationships."

Market niche

Hannam says Gouge is one of several clients that have brought Bravo Signs along with them on a move. And recently Bravo itself relocated.

Hannam worked out of his home for about eight months, but he jokes that his wife threatened to evict him once the larger machinery started coming in. So he found a location on Church Street in 2006, but that space didn't offer much of a retail-type presence.

This month Bravo Signs moved into a 3,500-square-foot building at Benjamin and Battleground. Hannam says that in just one week, the company has seen more walk-in customers than it ever did on Church Street.

"It's actually a slightly smaller space here, but we needed some exposure," he says. "We have our fingers in a lot of work all over the Triad and beyond. People were thinking, 'These guys must be small potatoes.' We're hoping our image catches up to our ability."

Mike Fowler, vice president of brokerage for Brown Investment Properties, helped Hannam find the new location. In addition Hannam's client, Brown Investment Properties is also his former employer. He worked there prior to Guilford County.

Hannam has used some contacts he made while at Brown to build a niche for his company — signs advertising properties for commercial real estate companies.

"He's a very talented guy, and he's very

COMPANY PROFILE

Name: Bravo Signs Inc.
Address: 1725 Benjamin Parkway, Greensboro 27408
Phone: (336) 510-0427
Web site: www.bravosigns.com
No. of employees: 8
Year established: 2005
Biggest challenge: Managing large amounts of information for multiple projects
Solution: Software, detailed record keeping and clear communication

WHO'S IN CHARGE

Name: Matt Hannam
Title: Lead designer
Age: 31
Education: Bachelor's degree in computer science, Gardner-Webb University
Family: Wife, Whitney; son, Ollie, age 2
Hobbies: Sailing
Best business decision: Hiring seasoned industry professionals
Career: Network administrator, Brown Investment Properties; network security administrator, Guilford County Information Services

capable," Fowler says. "We could see his entrepreneurial spirit and his potential to do his own thing. He has done an outstanding job of creating that niche for what he does."

Bravo works with a half dozen or so commercial real estate companies, and Hannam says the economic downturn has actually provided a small bounce for his business as more properties go on the market. He's also seen more requests for vehicle graphics as clients try to stretch their marketing budgets.

Looking forward, Hannam says he hopes Bravo Signs can increase its work on lighted sign production, installation and service. He says those jobs tend to be more challenging for his staff and also tend to create more long-term relationships with customers.

"I'm sunny on the future," Hannam says. "I'm so proud of the team I've put together here. They have a great track record, and we're excited to go forward."

Reach **STEVE IVEY** at (336) 370-2909 or sivey@bizjournals.com.

ON SALES: *No matter how bad the economy gets, put your name out*

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• Networking. I am a big fan of networking through your local organizations. You have two things available to you: time and money. Money being tight, time is what you have so use it. Get out there and network. Use your local chambers of commerce, a local BNI group, a trade organization — even some charities need help.

• Social networking is not for socializing anymore. Join Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook. If you don't know how, just "Google" it. There's lots of great information out there. Now is the time to get involved in some online networking, as well. Don't let it pass you by.

There is lots to do, and now is a great opportunity to jump on it. We have time.

Today, I am challenging you to be creative.

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