



Roy Schofield

Moving forward

One of the most common problems many small business owners face is that they can feel isolated and as if they have no one to confide in or bounce ideas off. This is down to the fact that a large proportion of small business owners operate their company single-handedly or with minimal staff.

A business mentor can be invaluable in situations like this, acting as a sounding board and brainstorming partner. Often, simply having somebody to talk through plans and ideas with can help a business owner organise his or her thoughts – and put them on the right track towards making their company a success.

The New Zealand retail industry hasn't had the easiest of times recently. The recession had a devastating and long-standing impact on many Kiwi business owners and unforeseen disasters, such as the Christchurch earthquake, haven't helped matters either. Things have been especially tough for the heads of small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups, some of whom won't have encountered such financially troubling times before. Fortunately, there are lifelines available – including the free business advice offered by Business Mentors New Zealand, the country's only national volunteer mentoring service.

Becoming the owner of a thriving business is the lifelong dream of many New Zealanders. However, the dream – once achieved – does not always live up to expectations. Despite the

assumption that self-employment will bring money, freedom and an early retirement, many small business owners actually end up exhausted, stressed and time-poor.

Time for help

This is where an experienced business mentor can be a real asset. A knowledgeable mentor can help business owners take a step back from their companies and see 'the bigger picture', as well as assist in identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that may have been initially missed. They can also help the business owner refocus on their business goals and offer advice on strategies to better achieve them.

The Chip Shop, based in Royal Oak, Auckland, is just one of many businesses that have benefited from the free mentoring service. The Chip Shop is now one of the busiest and most popular take-away shops for miles around. Tina and Trevor make their chips from scratch – emphasising the importance of draining them thoroughly – and crumb fish to order. They were also the first fish-and-chip shop to start offering gluten- and wheat-free products.

The couple decided to contact Business Mentors New Zealand

shortly after taking on their new venture. They were quickly teamed up with experienced local mentor Ian Halsted, who has a wealth of retail and business knowledge at his disposal.

"Tina had heard about Business Mentors and thought it sounded like just what we needed. So, we did a bit of research and decided to apply for a mentor," says Trevor. "We knew that we wanted some guidance right from the beginning, rather than waiting until something went wrong and having to get someone in to fix it.

contributed thoughts and ideas that we wouldn't necessarily have come up with and gave us pointers to keep us heading in the right direction."

Trevor has a background in food, having been a butcher and a food importer in the past. However, running a chip shop was an entirely new challenge for both him and Tina. The previous owner stayed with him for two weeks, following the sale of the business, to take him through how everything worked but after that he was on his own. It was then his responsibility to share his

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"Ian has been absolutely fantastic and we got on right from the beginning. He has been in business himself, and has been successful, so he understands what we're going through and what the various pitfalls are. It was also good to have someone with an entirely fresh perspective looking at our company and brainstorming with us. He

new-found knowledge with Tina who left her job teaching English to join him at The Chip Shop.

"It was definitely a steep learning curve,' laughs Trevor. 'But we wouldn't have it any other way now. We enjoy the sociable side of running a take-away shop and hearing the feedback from happy customers. It's what keeps us going."

Trevor and Tina are determined not to stand still and have big plans for the little fish-and-chip shop.

"We have a solid base of regular customers who come from all over Auckland for our fish and chips – but that doesn't mean we'll get complacent," says Trevor. "Every time we achieve a goal, we are looking at what we can do next. Everything can be tweaked and improved, whether it is service or the menu. There is so much competition around nowadays that you have to keep adapting. Otherwise, you will lose profits, business value and you will be letting your customers down."

Following their own positive experience with Business Mentors, Tina and Trevor are happy to recommend the service to other owners of small or start-up companies.

"Having a mentor on board has been extremely valuable," says Trevor. "Simply having someone listening to us and challenging us on certain points gave us the confidence that we were going about things properly. It was also extremely useful to have access to someone with such a broad set of skills, who we could ask questions and discuss things. We wanted to make sure we were starting out in the best way that we could and Business Mentors certainly helped us with that."

How it works

Since being established in 1991, Business Mentors has assisted over 53,000 small-to-medium businesses. It is funded, largely, by patrons from the private sector with additional support from New Zealand Trade and Enterprise. It provides a mentoring service to any business that is trading with evidence of accounts.

The not-for-profit organisation has over 1,700 very knowledgeable, independent, volunteer mentors placed throughout the country – all of whom are willing to share their skills and expertise with small- and medium-sized

business owners free of charge. The focus of the organisation is on developing capability, profitability, and employment generation.

There is no limit on the amount of mentoring sessions. The term of the relationship with a mentor depends on the objectives and goals both client and mentor jointly agree upon. They can also contact their co-ordinator at any point for further assistance.

Registering for a mentor is extremely straightforward. All the business owner needs to do is:

- Go to www.businessmentors.org.nz;
- Complete the on-line application form (registration fee of \$100 + gst);
- The application is directed to an agent nearest the location of the business (15 agents throughout New Zealand);
- A co-ordinator will contact the business owner within 10 working days to discuss the application in more detail;
- The co-ordinator will match the business owner to a mentor suited to their requirements; *and*
- The mentor will contact the business owner within five working days to arrange to meet – and the mentor goes to the business owner. Need some help? ■

□ By **Ray Schofield**, CEO of Business Mentors New Zealand. For more information about Business Mentors New Zealand and the service, visit: www.businessmentors.org.nz. The site provides information on the programme, case studies and allows business owners to apply for a mentor on-line. The organisation can also be contacted by calling: 0800 209 209.

Avoid getting your customers sidetracked



Are you having problems getting your customers from A to B?

Do you know how your customers think and what they want? How can you make their retail journey easier?

The end-to-end retail journey can easily go off course. While not every stage may be obvious or visible to your customer, a change in direction can create a hazard for your customers.

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