

It All Starts With You

SSA Speaker Norm Brodsky knows ways to improve your business.

By John Dunlap

There's an old Biblical proverb that says "Physician, heal thyself." As far as Norm Brodsky is concerned, that notion can (and should) apply to anyone who owns or operates a business. If you don't understand your own reasons for running a business and have goals of your own, then you likely aren't going to run a business in an effective manner.

Brodsky, who co-authors *Inc.* magazine's Street Smarts column, is the founder of six businesses. He began writing Street Smarts after being featured on *Inc.*'s cover in July 1995. The column was nominated for a National Magazine award in 2006. He recently concluded a nine-part series, "The Offer," about his ultimately unsuccessful attempt to sell his companies. He also is the co-author of the book, *The Knack: How Street-Smart Entrepreneurs Learn to Handle Whatever Comes Up*.

Brodsky knows a little something about starting up and running companies. The Brooklyn, New York, native and graduate of Rider College and Brooklyn Law School, began his professional career as a lawyer, but the slow pace of the courtroom made him want to do something different. His first entrepreneurial endeavor was Perfect Courier, a messenger service and trucking company in Brooklyn.

When the rise of fax machines in the early '80s reduced the need for messengers, Brodsky began looking for other opportunities. A phone call from a customer asking about box storage prompted him to call storage facilities in the area. Recognizing that others were charging too much and the potential market was great, Brodsky began CitiStorage with the profits from his trucking company. The archival storage and retrieval company now holds more than three million boxes.

He will bring his knowledge and expertise to Colorado Springs and the SSA's Spring Conference & Trade Show, where he will serve as the general session speaker on Monday, April 19. Brodsky took some time to discuss his ideas about being a successful entrepreneur with *SSA Globe*.

And what about the notion of understanding yourself before you can run a business effectively?

"I have a business plan that I call 'YES,' which stands for Yourself, Employees and Sales," Brodsky says. "It all really starts with Yourself. You have to ask yourself why are you doing this—is it for monetary goals or life goals? Then you need a written life plan. It is surprising how many more people accomplish their life plans when they write them down."

"It isn't unlike when you make plans to lose 20 pounds, or take a vacation, or want to spend time with your kids," adds Brodsky. "Believe it or not, when you write down those goals they have a 50 percent better chance of getting done than if you don't. So, you have to have your life plans in order before you can make business plans."

The Value of Employees

Next up for the successful entrepreneur is taking good care of your employees. They are, after all, the people who meet with both your potential and established customers.

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“Employees are your most valuable asset,” Brodsky says. “How you treat your employees will go a long way to how well they treat your customers. Building a business in the right way always involves having good, dependable and happy employees.”

And, of course, there is the Sales part of the equation.

“You really have to learn to pay attention to what your customers are saying,” Brodsky adds. “Believe me, customers will tell you what they want if you only listen to them. You might be talking to them and telling them everything that you have and they may not want most of that stuff. We seem to have lost some of the fine art of listening to our customers these days.”

“Once they tell you what they want, you need to see if you can find a way to make it happen. It is almost like you are designing a manifest for each of your customers. When you are doing that it is showing them that you are different from most of the other businesses.”

Brodsky also believes that it helps any business to try and find a niche, something that separates that company from the competition.

“When I started CitiStorage, I asked other box storage people what they were charging and when they told me, I

automatically decided to charge less,” Brodsky says. “When I found out how long it took the existing box storage companies to pick up the boxes from customers, I made sure we would get them quicker. And when I found out other storage companies had 20-foot high storage space, I made ours 60.”

“The message is clear: don’t follow all the trends, don’t follow the crowds. Think differently.”

And perhaps most importantly, according to Brodsky, watch your cash.

“Especially when you are starting out, you need to watch your cash,” he adds. “You have to spend wisely.”

Brodsky feels that anyone can do well in the business world, you just have to be smart and set goals.

“Anybody can acquire the knack for succeeding in business,” he concludes. “You are not born an entrepreneur. If you have a lot of education or just some education, it doesn’t matter. Anybody can do it. Lots of people do things wrong in life and the key is what you learn from those experiences.”

If it sounds like Brodsky is a “YES man,” he most definitely is. And one gets the impression that he is meeting those life goals he has written down. You can, too, by paying attention to yourself, your employees and your customers. ❖



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