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Three Small Business Makeovers helped Broward businesses get on track

Bee Creative Academy preschool credited its makeover with instilling the confidence to move forward

SCORE volunteers helped Baby Otter reach some of its goals

Makeover helped DF International Group in its growth

BY JULIE LANDRY LAVIOLETTE

Special to the Miami Herald

It's tough to run a small business. Business owners wear a lot of hats, work long hours, and often wing it when it comes to making marketing or growth decisions.

For the past several years, the Miami Herald has stepped in to help Broward County entrepreneurs through its Small Business Makeover series, bringing in mentors from Broward SCORE to advise owners on marketing, sales, operations and growth strategies. During a makeover, SCORE mentors typically meet with owners three times to assess their needs and come up with an action plan.

“Small businesses benefit from the makeover by getting new perspectives and ideas from a team of SCORE counselors who have a broad range of expertise,” said David Harris, a volunteer SCORE counselor who has led several makeovers in Broward. “The program is important because many small businesses cannot afford professional consultants, but they need the advice of outside experts. The business makeover program provides them with quality business counseling without cost.”

Here is a look back at three makeover clients from 2015, and where they are today:

Bee Creative Academy



Yessenia Mercado tells a story, with finger puppets, to her students at Bee Creative Academy, a preschool in West Park on Jan. 21. **AL DIAZ** adiaz@miamiherald.com

Bee Creative Academy, a preschool, opened in West Park in 2014 with one student. Owner Evelyn Taveras was soon at 60 students, and looking to grow. She met with the Broward SCORE team in April 2015 for a makeover to get guidance on how to grow strategically.

Since that time, Taveras has expanded her business with a second location in Coral Springs. Though she had considered building from the ground up, she ultimately bought an existing preschool and rebranded it. At the SCORE team's recommendation, she created each location with a separate corporate structure.

"I took the SCORE team's advice in creating cohesive operating systems that resemble each other in both schools, and training staff in Coral Springs to do what was already working in West Park," Taveras said.

She also instituted an educational program in the new location, moving it from its roots as a daycare center. "Now it's really mimicking what made me successful here," Taveras said.

Taveras hired an experienced director for the Coral Springs location, and has an eye on training other management personnel to continue to grow the brand. At the SCORE team's recommendation, she did a written business plan for financials for the new location, and followed her existing model for marketing and advertising.

The mentors advised a website update, so Taveras made it more interactive, with a questionnaire for parents requesting a tour and information for job seekers. She also personalized the website by location, with different photographs and center information.

The mentors suggested Taveras outsource some tasks. Taveras hired a marketing company to manage Google Adwords to increase exposure, and has continued blogging and strengthening her social media presence. She also hired an accountant in January.

Since the makeover, Taveras has added one employee in West Park and five in Coral Springs.

“I think the makeover helped a lot. It strengthened my confidence in myself, because they said it was unusual to see someone in less than a year’s time in business to be doing so well,” Taveras said. “It gave me the confidence to move forward into the second one, because I believed in myself.”

Baby Otter



Baby Otter, based in Plantation, made a name for itself in South Florida with its five-day Turn, Kick, Reach swimming program. A traveling swim school that sends instructors to clients’ homes, the company has two arms: the for-profit Baby Otter Andre Dawson Aquatic Center; and the nonprofit Baby Otter Scholarship and Education Fund, which teaches swimming techniques to underprivileged and special needs kids.

When the Broward SCORE team visited with co-owners Marlene Bloom and Mindy York in January 2015, the company was looking into licensing its program and expanding its geographic reach.

At the SCORE team's suggestion, the business partners put together a written growth plan. Now the company has two pending licensees, and is working with a national company to help find other potential licensees. The swim school had a 50 percent increase in business in 2015, and is expanding to Stuart, Jupiter and throughout Palm Beach.

Over the past year, Baby Otter worked with social media companies and started reaching out to mom bloggers to get coverage. They are now looking for a social media intern, York said. The company was named best traveling swim school in a local parenting site's awards, and was featured in a segment by NBC News in South Florida. "We've really made incredible strides," York said.

SCORE mentors suggested a website redo, and the website was redesigned to add the licensing opportunity.

With the nonprofit arm, the partners are continuing to seek donations to further their mission. "We're going to keep doing what we're doing, because it's working," York said. "We have big goals."

York said the makeover process was a positive influence. "They were the most wonderful mentors we have ever come in contact with," she said. "They cared. They were always available for any support."

DF International Group



Based in Sunrise, DF International Group had carved a niche for itself wholesaling GPS tracking systems for vehicles, boats and cargo throughout Latin America and the U.S., as well as Dubai, Nigeria and Canada. In the family business, Diego Arteaga, his wife, Francis, and daughter, Francine, pitched in to handle everything from unpacking goods to answering the phones to administrative duties.

Diego Arteaga met with SCORE mentors in March 2015 to get advice on acquiring new customers and on increasing sales with current customers. He also wanted to unroll a new product aimed at child and pet safety.

The SCORE team recommended he start with a business plan, review competition and do a product analysis to see what made the most business sense. Arteaga said he is still in the process of working on his plan and his growth objectives for 2016. But to grow more strategically, the company consolidated its areas of business to three main areas: GPS for vehicles, fleets and motorcycles; GPS for cargo, to track in containers; and GPS to track people and pets.

Arteaga said he added some new brands to his product lines, and took a big step in expanding from solely offering hardware to offering the software that operates the systems the company sells.

Geographically, the company expanded its reach in the United States, adding customers in Kansas, California, New York and South Carolina. The growth helped offset losses in the Latin America market due to a devaluation of currency, Arteaga said.

The company hired two part-time assistants, and is interviewing for a technical position to help with the software for the devices.

At the SCORE team's suggestion, the company completed a website redesign, and Arteaga plans to have its new technical hire continue to upgrade the site and keep it current and consumer friendly.

"We are having potential customers reach out from around the world, including Indonesia, Somalia, Europe and the Philippines, just from finding us on the Internet. So that is working," he said.

Arteaga said the makeover helped him on his way. "The makeover gave me very good ideas, in terms of the business plan, what I need to do with the brand, what

I need to do with the people, and what I need to do to expand,” he said.
“Sometimes you need somebody else to look at it . . . to help you understand who you are, and where you want to go.”

ABOUT SCORE

Based in Washington, D.C., SCORE is a nonprofit with more than 12,000 volunteers working out of about 400 chapters around the country offering free counseling to small businesses. There are seven chapters on Florida’s east coast, including Broward SCORE, which has more than 60 volunteer counselors.

Counselors from Broward SCORE meet with small business owners and offer free one-on-one counseling as well as dozens of low-cost workshops, such as “Supercharge Your Website” on Tuesday and “Build Your Brand” on Wednesday. See more under “Local Workshops” at www.broward.score.org. To volunteer or learn more about SCORE, go to www.score.org or www.broward.score.org.

HOW TO APPLY FOR A SMALL BUSINESS MAKEOVER

Business Monday’s Small Business Makeovers focus on a particular aspect of a business that needs help. Experts in the community will provide the advice. If you would like a makeover, concentrate on one aspect of your business that needs help — corporate organization, marketing, financing, for example — and tell us what your problems are.

The makeover is open to companies in Broward or Miami-Dade counties in business at least two years. Email your request to rclarke@MiamiHerald.com and put “Makeover” in the subject line.