

BootCamp Helps Businesses Increase Customer Base

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Brenda Casabona, president of DeFluri's Fine Chocolates in Martinsburg, attended a boot camp last year in Florida, but instead of improving military skills she trained in improving her understanding of business.

"It was a great training session," she said. "I heard a lot of really, really interesting ideas. It really gets you thinking about ways you can make your business better. If people think you're going down there to play, they're wrong. It's all work."

The two-day Destination BootCamp in Orlando is a crash course in remodeling businesses. Jon Schallert, president of The Schallert Group, created the workshop to teach independent owners techniques to increase consumer spending and customer traffic, even in a slow economy.

"It's an advantage for any business that interacts with customers," Schallert said. "They must understand competition in today's marketplace. You don't just compete with products and price. There are other reasons customers will shop with you." The next BootCamp is scheduled for Sept. 17-18.

14 Steps to Success

During the BootCamp, Schallert teaches his "hierarchy of 14 steps." Some of those steps are showing customers you are an expert in the products you are marketing; embracing different forms of technology; public relations, financial analysis; and constructing a visually pleasing facility.

Creating a consumer destination, Schallert said, is critical because today's customers have more purchasing choices than ever. Hence, unique marketing is required. Small businesses must find a variety of ways to compete with superstores such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot, Schallert said.

"Those who wouldn't usually have time can spend these two days focusing on marketing and business operations," said Schallert, who has 20 years of experience with retail and small business. When he

goes to different locations across the U.S. to speak, Schallert visits about eight area businesses. He estimates he sees between 600 and 800 businesses a year. "I've seen a wealth of different marketing techniques," he said. "My program is a compilation of what I've known and what I've learned from others."

A Destination for West Virginians

The September session marks the third BootCamp for Schallert. Of the 60 participants who attended the past two, nine were from West Virginia, a relatively large chunk.

Schallert, a Wisconsin native, said so many from West Virginia come because he has spoken 24 times in 18 different West Virginia cities. He lived in Huntington about two years while working with Hallmark's marketing department and said he has "a good understanding of the challenges businesses have there." (He left Hallmark seven years ago to start his firm, which now employees three.)

He also has worked closely with the West Virginia Main Street program, and the Small Business Development Center has always publicized his seminars.

Perhaps a bigger reason West Virginians are attracted to BootCamp is that West Virginia is the only state that will cover the cost with a grant.

The cost is \$1,195, but West Virginia businesses can apply for a Work Force training grant that will cover tuition. To qualify, businesses must have been operating at least one year, have fewer than 51 employees and be in good standing tax-wise. Schallert said a business is likely to receive the grant if it meets the criteria.

Business owners must pay travel, food and lodging expenses. But those costs should be minimal, Schallert said. September is off-season for Orlando's tourism industry, meaning hotel rates should be low. Flights, he said, are also inexpensive.

Kimberly Donahue, work force manager with the West Virginia Small

Business Development Center, called the program "a great learning opportunity for our businesses."

"Last year, attendees returning from it said they've never spent a better two days where they can concentrate on nothing but their business potential and return with strategies they can implement immediately," Donahue said.

"The grant is for training purposes," Schallert, who went through an approval process to be recognized as a certified consultant by West Virginia, said. "Small businesses account for a huge portion of the state's revenue. It's an advantage for the state because these small businesses learn to draw revenue from outside the state."

Casabona said the trip is worth the cost and suggested BootCamp to other small businesses.

"You meet other people who own small businesses and get a lot of great advice," she said. "And the ideas are doable and practical. There are a lot of things you can bring back and share with the business community."

Personalized Training

From 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. on each day of the BootCamp, Schallert speaks to the group. Then until 8 p.m., participants experience "an evening of experts." The experts come from the print advertising, accounting and public relations industries.

Tom Kittredge, president of Terradon Communications Group in Nitro, will be giving Web-based marketing and content management advice. This will be Kittredge's third BootCamp.

"It's a great program," he said. "Jon certainly knows his stuff. The pace is just right, and there's so much information. This is something that will just right for everyone." Each expert makes time to spend with each participant individually.

"It's not like an average seminar, where they talk at you," Kittredge, who met Schallert through Main Street, said. "We make sure it's personalized. Jon takes a vested interest in your business."