

OPINION

Small businesses need a mission

By RANDALL WHEELER

The Pacific Coast Business Times and the Los Angeles District Office of the United States Small Business Administration conceived the Spirit of Small Business in 2003.

Since then, awards have been given to companies and their leaders who have demonstrated a sustainable enterprise, industry leadership and community awareness.

In order for companies to achieve this level of success, it takes effort, foresight, dedication and commitment. Author Stephen Covey said it best when he wrote, "Begin with the end in mind." This is where a well-written vision, mission and values statement can play a vital role.

The vision statement is a brief description of what the company looks like when it has achieved the success the owner intended. It is written as if the company has already realized its goals.

Winners of the Spirit of Small Business awards recognize this principle.

Michael Wagner, owner of Andria's Seafood Restaurant and Market in Ventura and winner in the family-owned business category, said, "Almost half the restaurants that open their doors for business, close them in less than a year. That's because they don't have a good vision."

Another award winner, Matt Kolb, President of National Coatings Corp. in Camarillo, agrees.

"Any company that is going to be successful has to have a vision of where it wants to go, and it's the vision that helps define the mission or driving force of the business."

A mission statement is a brief description of the company's purpose and how that purpose will be carried out. Saalex Solutions, a systems' engineering firm in Oxnard and winner in the veteran-owned business category, has a mission to deliver quality by focusing on customer relationships. First, the company strives to instill confidence and trust. Secondly, the company believes in exceeding customer expectations, and third, the focus is



Michael Wagner, owner of Andria's Seafood in Ventura Harbor, attributes his restaurant's success to having a clear vision for the company.

always on the customer and making it easy to do business with Saalex Solutions.

Vision and mission are important because they establish clear direction for employees. Since it's nearly impossible to develop a set of policies and procedures to cover every contingency, it's critical for employees to know and understand the guiding principles upon which the business is founded. Any employee, when confronted with uncertainty, can simply ask, "What solution supports our vision, mission and values," and then act accordingly.

Vision and mission represent two sides of a foundational business pyramid. The third is values. A values statement identifies the ethical principles required for conducting business.

Another Spirit of Small Business winner Softshare Inc., a Santa Barbara-based e-commerce software company, lists innovation and dedication as two of its values.

Wagner of Andria's Seafood considers consistency as one of his core values. He also said, "You have to have respect for customers and staff. I never ask a staff member to do something that I wouldn't do myself."

Kolb of National Coatings also speaks about values. He said the company's commitment is to "operate with the highest integrity possible." Company leaders who "walk the talk" help employees to do the same. The payoff comes in the

form of happy customers, loyal staff and sustainable growth.

The more ingrained values are in the corporate culture, the greater the likelihood of increasing the company's brand or way of doing business. In addition, shared values lead to higher employee morale, sustained loyalty and greater productivity and efficiency. This is one reason why company owners need to communicate in words and in actions that no aspect of the

mission statement is worth achieving if it means violating the company's values.

Without a vision, mission and values statement, business owners are operating at a disadvantage. If you don't have one, take the time to create one. Engage staff in the process, and make it a collaborative effort. Then frame the document and post it throughout the company. Use it as the foundation for department meetings, staff-management dialogues and company retreats. And most importantly, make sure it becomes the litmus test everyone uses for making sound business decisions.

There's no question about it. The winners of the Spirit of Small Business awards would not be where they are today without having developed their vision, mission and values statements. And in order to grow their businesses, they, like other successful business owners, teach, model and transfer decision-making skills to their employees based on these core documents. In this way, company owners share their dreams, priorities and expectations with others. In return, employees are more likely to learn to think, behave and act in a manner that is consistent with the owner's expectations.

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