

## Business success: It's all about customers, relationships

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Make customer service your top priority, build relationships with vendors and bankers, and infuse your business with vision and passion.

That was advice panelists and speakers offered on Thursday at The Miami Herald's annual Small Business Forum, sponsored by Florida International University's Eugenio Pino and Family Global Entrepreneurship Center and the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship South Florida.

Seasoned entrepreneurs and business experts provided their takes on starting, growing — and sometimes selling — small businesses, as well as how to surmount challenges that often arise

“What keeps us going, and I think it's true for any type of company, is customer service,” said Valerie Holstein, co-founder, president and chief executive of Fort Lauderdale-based CableOrganizer.com. “As long as you are there for your customer, and you have value added, you don't have to be the most inexpensive.”

The forum encompassed three sessions, with panelists discussing web-based businesses, financing and international business.

“The money will come if you are successful at creating your vision, and making your vision real,” advised Birame N. Sock, who founded Miami Beach-based Third Solutions, a multi-merchant digital receipts service, in 2008.

Vince Virga, chief executive of SkillStorm, an IT services provider, said he learned a lesson the hard way in 2008, when he ran into snags while switching his financing company, and came within two weeks of missing payroll for 600 employees. He went back to his original financing venture, which welcomed him back.

“I never understood the value of a relationship with the people who do your financing,” Virga said.

Snaring customers is also key for any service business.

David Clarke, chief executive, managing partner and co-founder of BGT Partners, advises going after big companies, offering small projects that will develop into larger ones after you have proven your abilities.

“If you get one big company, you get other big ones,” he said, likening it to elephant hunting. “Once you get one elephant, they come herding in, because they all talk to each other.”

For those just starting a business, the Florida Small Business Development Center, funded by the U.S. Small Business Administration, offers training and private one-on-one sessions to help entrepreneurs, said Rafael Cruz, regional director in Broward, of the Florida Small Business Development Center.

SBA-guaranteed loans can range up to \$5 million, and may be available to fund real estate purchase with 10 percent down, said Althea Harris, assistant district director of the SBA's office in Miami. Export financing is also an option, said Mary Hernandez, regional manager of the SBA's trade programs in South Florida, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"With SBA-guaranteed financing, using receivables as collateral, you can take the business to the next level," she said.

For any business, there are three people you must know before you really need them: a lawyer, a banker and an accountant who is familiar with your industry, advised Bill Hansen, owner of Bill Hansen Catering, who started his business 32 years ago.

In addition, don't underestimate the importance of face-to-face meetings when conducting business internationally, said Devon Rifkin, chief executive of the Great American Hangar Company.

Get on a plane, he said.

"It pays for itself 10 times over," Rifkin said. "And it's smart business."

Developing a relationship with your suppliers is also crucial, said Frank Unanue, president of Goya Foods of Florida.

And be aware that nowadays, competitors can be anywhere, said Manuel Montero, chief executive and founder of Miami Beach-based SafetyPay, a secure payment facilitator and clearinghouse that serves online shoppers, online merchants and banks.

"So you have to find a niche where you can compete," Montero said.

Above all else, having passion and vision are paramount.

Miguel "Mike" Fernandez, chairman of MBF Healthcare Partners L.P., and the forum's keynote speaker, said his mantra, and the screen saver at his company's computers spells out Super: Sacrifice, Urgency, Passion, Execution = Results.

Fernandez said he had a complex that because he did not have a college degree he would accomplish less, so he was driven to work harder and faster.

He advises business owners to surround yourself with people who are smarter than you, recognize mistakes and redirect your vision when necessary, and don't forget the importance of your customer.

Imparting your vision is critical, Fernandez said.

"You have to believe your own BS," he said. "Live it, dream it, see it, believe it."