

BIG IDEAS

Taking advisory services online

ADAM O'DANIEL | STAFF WRITER
aodaniel@bizjournals.com

Tom Bixby is giving small-business consulting a digital makeover.

Bixby, a Charlotte entrepreneur and longtime management consultant, has developed a Web-based system called EvaluSys to advise small-business owners on management practices. Instead of arranging lengthy and expensive meetings, managers can get a basic diagnosis and recommendations after taking a survey, or they can connect with a business adviser online for one-on-one help.

QUICKINFO

VITAL STATS

- EvaluSys generates revenue by charging participants a fee.
- Bixby says the system offers diagnostic services on topics such as marketing, sales, planning, human resources, process and financial control. Details: www.evaluys.com

How long have you spent developing EvaluSys? What was your biggest obstacle to overcome?

EvaluSys was first envisioned in 2005 and has been under development for over three years. The biggest obstacle has been keeping technology

development moving as we continued to evolve our business model to meet the needs of our customers.

The process of innovation has been challenging. Without an existing example to point to in the market, describing the concept to business owners and advisers to solicit feedback and market validation has been a struggle.

What's the next step for your company?

It's time to market our product. We are launching a program to connect into established networks of business advisers in other cities around the country. Key advisers have been identified in markets such as Raleigh, Atlanta, Jacksonville, Toledo and San Francisco, and we expect the program to expand rapidly.

As an entrepreneur, what's a mistake you've learned from?

One mistake I learned from is that having a business idea that a handful of prospective customers think is a sure bet doesn't guarantee that you have identified the ultimate business model. Similarly, don't react to a bit of negative feedback by reinventing the model or losing enthusiasm for your idea. It is critical to get feedback from a broad cross-section of your market and digest that learning before taking action.



Bixby

Sales declines, tax worries hurt small-business outlook

Small-business owners aren't convinced the recession is ending. Their outlook darkened in July, according to a monthly survey conducted by the National Federation of Independent Business. NFIB's index of small-business indicators fell 1.3 points last month to 86.5, the second monthly decline in a row.

The chief reason for the drop was a decline in the number of small-business owners who expect the economy to improve in the next six months. About 32% of those surveyed cited poor sales as their No. 1 business problem. Some 22% cited taxes as their top concern.

HELP WANTED: EXPERT ADVICE ON YOUR QUESTIONS

How do I keep good talent during a downturn?

Beverley Cox, executive director, human resources, Quaero: Business owners often take the view that employees are lucky to have a job in hard times, so they don't consider retention a priority issue. But if they take that approach, as soon as the economy turns around, high-potential employees will be the first to go.

Most employees put a premium on having a challenging and rewarding place to work. Assign key talent to special projects you've been putting off or that will provide value once the recovery begins.

Allison Grace, owner, Instant HR Solutions: Set a clear, compelling direction that empowers each employee so you can use their abilities and talents to help create a positive future for your company. Communicate openly and honestly, keeping them informed and updated, even if the news isn't good.

Recognize and reward high performance. Even if you don't have the budget for bonuses and perks, there are simple things you can do to let

your employees know you appreciate them.

Nancy McNelis, vice president, client services consulting, Right Management: In times like this, organizations need to invest more in engaging their employees by recognizing and rewarding them. Otherwise, you risk losing them once the economy rebounds.

Let employees know they are part of the future. Invest in building a career-management culture. Understand how employee motivators differ. Be creative and take time to understand how employees feel about their work and what motivates them.



McNelis

Build loyalty and trust with employees by being an exceptional communicator and demonstrating the utmost integrity. Be accessible, open, honest and appreciative.

If a commitment is made, no matter how big or small, deliver on it.

To submit questions, e-mail David Harris at dharris@bizjournals.com.

BEST BETS

Learn benefits of social media

Learn how to market your business using social media in this session, dubbed LinkedIn 101. It is led by business consultant Stan Gwizdak.

Date: Aug. 27

Time: 8-11:45 a.m.

Location: Piedmont Renaissance Center, 51 Union St. S., Concord

Cost: \$35

To register: Call (704) 262-1551 or go to www.prc-concord.com

Values in leadership

Jena Abernathy, chief administration officer at Premier Inc., will speak at the Charlotte Chamber's metro chapter luncheon, focusing on how leadership fundamentals affect an organization's goals, culture and recruitment.

Date: Aug. 25

Time: 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.

Location: The Westin Charlotte, 601 S. College St.

Cost: \$20 in advance and \$25 at the door for members, \$45 for nonmembers

To register: Call (704) 378-1366 or e-mail twilson@charlottechamber.com

Equal employment opportunity

This EEO compliance course by The Employers Association will cover the basics of filing government-required reports.

Date: Aug. 27

Time: 9-11 a.m.

Location: The Employers Association, 3020 W. Arrowood Road

Cost: \$35 for members, \$40 for nonmembers

To register: Call (704) 522-8011 or go to www.employersassoc.com

STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING A BUSINESS

Merger quickly getting in tune

EastCoast, former rival book plans for growth

BEA QUIRK
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Corporate mergers often end up costing more than anticipated, and the combined entity ends up scrambling to cover those unexpected expenses.

But it's been the other way around for EastCoast Entertainment, which merged with rival Daniel Entertainment Group in January.

The deal's operating efficiencies have prompted expansion plans at the entertainment and special-events booking agency.

"When we were competitors, we both used to spend a lot of money defensively, doing things because the other one was because we were both after the same business," says Doug Daniel, who had left EastCoast in 2001 to form his own agency. "We're still spending money — but on our own terms, not someone else's. It's way smarter."

EastCoast also is planning a few marketing ini-

tiatives. For example, instead of simply handing out business cards at events such as bridal shows, Daniel says the firm is considering holding daylong showcases. Several of the bands EastCoast represents would give brief performances for prospective clients to evaluate.

Now with its larger size — representing about 80 bands — EastCoast is expanding regionally and even pursuing some national talent. "We've got more buying power," Daniel says. "We might even be able to sign exclusive agreements with some groups."

EastCoast has 48 people based in seven offices between Washington and Atlanta, with "virtual" offices in Philadelphia and Virginia Beach, Va. "We may add staff to build a foundation to prepare for future growth," Daniel says.

Larry Farber and Ed Duncan founded EastCoast in 1986. They approached Daniel about a year ago about a merger as part of their succession planning.

The transition has been smooth, Daniel says. "The biggest adjustment has been going from an employee to an owner with equal footing."



Daniel