

INDUSTRY ■ IDEAS ■ INNOVATION
BusinessOwner

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Little shop's horrors

Frances Stewart

BUSINESS owners need to view their company from a customer perspective to realise its full potential.

Customer experience expert Phil Corke said Australian retailers were not doing enough to make the shopping "experience" enjoyable.

Mr Corke, a senior member of the customer experience division of British innovation agency What If!, said Australia had fallen behind the rest of the developed world when it came to looking after its retail customers.

"This is quite surprising, especially

when you consider Australia has a lot going for it," he said.

"Australia is bright, prosperous and sophisticated, yet its nation's supermarkets, department stores and call centres are dragging behind on the world stage in relation to customers' experience."

According to Mr Corke, retail businesses — no matter whether they are small, medium or large — need to give customers a "great experience from the moment they enter to the moment they leave the store".

"Everyone has a current customer experience, it's just a question of whether it is acknowledged and engineered to be the best possible one or not," he said.

'THE MAJORITY ARE ACTUALLY SHOCKED WHEN THEY REALISE HOW CLIENTS SEE THEIR BUSINESS.'

One way to achieve this was by looking at the business and its service the way a customer would.

Bizmetrics owner Steve Major, who specialises in strategic business advising and mentoring, said very few small to medium enterprises

were generating the growth and prosperity they could because they lacked the customer perspective.

To address this, Mr Major said business owners should take time out to step back from the company and examine both internal and external operations.

"Businesses rarely realise how much the inner workings of the company affect its bottom line and productivity. Nor do they realise how simple it can be to eliminate these problems and maximise company growth," he said.

Mr Major said looking at the business from the outside could often be hard for owners to do.

"But once they do that, more often than not, it becomes very clear what they should do," he said.

"The majority are actually shocked when they realise how clients see their business. They see it in an entirely different context."

A good starting point was observing competitors, Mr Major said.

"That can often make it easier to start looking at things from a customer perspective," he said.

"But don't limit yourself to just looking at competitors in your industry."

"There is a lot to be learned from a wide range of businesses."

Beauty career ties up loose ends

Claire Heaney

AS A 10-year-old, Rohini Ram loved nothing more than dressing up and playing with make-up.

"I always loved using make-up and if there was a bride preparing for her wedding I loved to help and be around as her make-up and hair was done," she said.

She longed to work in the industry but her Fijian Indian parents frowned on a career in the beauty industry — because at the time it was considered a job unworthy of the family's status.

Decades later the grandmother has finally realised her dream, establishing her own beauty salon and launching a new range of products.

Mrs Ram said when she arrived in Australia from Fiji in 1982 she worked in a variety of jobs, including customer service at Myer, and other stock control and sales job.

Her first foray into business came in the late 1990s when she ran a shop in Williamstown selling Indonesian artefacts. While she enjoyed the freedom of running her own business, she said she was inexperienced and did not know enough about the business she was in.

"After one year I folded up the business and left it ... I came out even but what I learned is that you need to do a business that you really know about and are passionate about," she said.

"After I closed the shop I went to Malaysia to visit a friend and to relax."

Mrs Ram said it was while holidaying in 2000 that she started to realise her long-held dream to work in the beauty industry.

She heard of a beauty course specialising in threading — an Indian and Middle Eastern practice of

removing hair using twisted cotton thread.

Mrs Ram said threading has a following in Britain and the US because it does not use chemicals and is suitable for people who suffer allergic reactions.

"I rang my husband and told him I wanted to do the course and how much it would cost," she said.

She said he was resigned to her

'YOU NEED A BUSINESS YOU REALLY KNOW ABOUT AND ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT.'

following her passion. "He said 'just do what will make you happy'," she said.

After she finished the eight-week course, Mrs Ram set up business in the family's Hoppers Crossing home. Her client base was developed largely via word-of-mouth.

She completed more training in Melbourne and added to her suite of services, offering massage, facials, waxing and other treatments.

She said focus on Bollywood has seen an upsurge in the number of people wanting to have henna applied for weddings.

Mrs Ram said 2003 was a turning point for the business. She started sourcing herbal products from India and she looked at moving the business out of her home.

"People loved the services I provided but they did not want to travel to Hoppers Crossing," she said.

Continued Page 76



Rohini's way

DO something you are passionate about.

CONTINUE to do training courses to add to your skills.

REVIEW and add to your services to ensure you are catering for all your existing and prospective clients.

USE a website to complement your marketing material and provide accessible information about your services.

MAKE sure your branding reflects your business. In this case it is fresh and clean.

USE sandwich boards to draw attention to your business, subject to local council laws.

GET your clients to be your referees.

MAKE sure packaging is fresh, classy and doesn't look cheap.

Fresh touch: Rohini Ram and her line of make-up products. Picture: DARRYL GREGORY

F B 1 2 3 | C M Y K | DHS 21-FEB-2008 PAGE 75 FIRST

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