

UNR Case Study: NxLevelL helps veterinarian develop small business strategy



Fernley veterinarian Dr. Laura Remsen, shown with her dog Zeb, owns Animal Care Center. In 2010, she took the NxLevelL training program for entrepreneurs to help her expand her practice. / Photo provided by Laura Remsen

Written by
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No manual exists on how to succeed in business -- but a fully developed plan can help guide entrepreneurs to a successful beginning.

"Running a business without a business plan is like building a house without blueprints," said Kathy Carrico, training director and NxLevelL state administrator.

For more than 10 years, the Nevada Small Business Development Center, located in the Ansari Business Building at the University of Nevada, Reno, has taught more than 1,800 Nevada business leaders how to plan in a entrepreneurial training program called NxLevelL.

Fernley veterinarian Laura Remsen took the class in September 2010 because she was looking to expand. But at the same time her business, Animal Care Center, had hit a slump.

"What caught my attention was the five or six sessions of marketing, which we needed help with," she said.

She also signed up her business manager for the 13-week course that covers how to perform research, legal issues, human resources, marketing strategies, financial planning and management.

At first, Remsen said she hated the course. After working an eight-hour day, she would head to the three-hour class about better business practices.

"I asked myself, 'What have I've gotten myself into?'" she said.

But each week, experts, such as lawyers and human resources professionals, would speak to the class. They would share how to run a business, explain what business owners were doing wrong and how to fix it.

Remsen already has a business plan for expansion, but she tweaked it after the class.

"We learned that it was not the time to expand and that we had other things to consider first," she said.

New Media

One of the items was more effective marketing. While she was focused on new media tactics, such as Facebook and Twitter, some residents in Fernley still didn't know about her practice. After market research, Remsen said she realized that most of the people in her market still get their information from the local newspaper, chamber meetings and newsletters.

"I know what I wanted for our clients," Remsen said. "But that wasn't necessarily what they wanted."

Her practice focused its efforts on local news providers as well as redesigning the website,

www.accfernley.vetsuite.com.

Remsen's business has increased at least 10 percent since she took the class, she said.

And because of the class, she also has established contacts in the business community and even had a SCORE member come out and evaluate her business. SCORE provides free advice to entrepreneurs working to start new businesses and expand existing companies.

The Payoff

Remsen bought the business eight years ago but taught herself how to run it. She was spending at least 60 hours at work and wanted to spend more time being a veterinarian.

NxLevelL taught her how to be more efficient. She had cut down on her hours and learned to hand more responsibility to her eight employees.

Remsen said she looks forward to improving her financial planning. She said she hopes to complete her planned expansion in the next three years.

"The course gave me the realization that I can do this expansion in an organized way, not on a whim or wish," Remsen said.

NxLevelL

NxLevelL training is a national program founded in 1994. More than 170,000 graduates have learned how to conduct business research, legal structure, financial planning and growth plans. Textbooks and materials are updated every two years, and supplements are provided to keep the class up to date. The

Reno class, which begins Thursday, will include topics as how to use social media and opportunities for green businesses.

Small business owners usually are highly-skilled individuals, but they are seldom trained to run a business.

The class shows them how to perform market research, and understand who their potential customers are and how much they are willing to spend on their services. The final goal of the course is for participants to write a business plan.

"A lot of people come in with an idea and feel it is outstanding," Carrico said. "(The small-business center makes) them do the numbers and research, so it's a realistic plan and not just a dream."

The program will be offered in eight Nevada cities this year.

"It's overwhelming enough to start a business," Carrico said. "The business plan really helps them in the right direction."

Remsen now thinks so highly of the program that she said she wants to take it again, and recommends it even to those who aren't business owners.