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MINDING YOUR BUSINESS

Growth stirs caterers to cook up new approach

Owners often struggle with hiring managers, restructuring business to deal with changes as their firms expand

By Ann Meyer
Special to the Tribune
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Jim Horan said the growth of his \$12 million-plus catering and event-planning business was strictly "an accident," at least until recently.

Trained as a social worker, Horan had no grand plans to make it big in the business world. After a successful summer venture as a caterer in 1983, when Horan prepared and served meals to commercial film crews, he made the gig his full-time job.

His Chicago company, Blue Plate Catering, chugged along for more than 15 years, its growth fueled largely through word-of-mouth referrals and by establishing relationships with Chicago's cultural institutions, Horan said. Then in 2001, it reached a turning point.

"We seemed to be plateauing," Horan said.

The company needed a new strategy and business structure.

"It was something of an identity crisis," he said. "We had to revisit who do we want to be, and how do we do it."

Growth inevitably involves change, including a new way of thinking on the business owner's part. And that's not always easy to accomplish, said Raman Chadha, executive director at DePaul University's Coleman Entrepreneurship Center.

"The silver bullet is trying to transition from owner-operator to manager, so you're not the person doing all the work," Chadha said.

To do that, entrepreneurs often seek advice by assembling a board of directors or a peer advisory group or by hiring professionals with the necessary business acumen, Chadha said.

Horan introduced Jodi Fyfe to the company as its director of business development in September 2001, when Blue Plate Catering had sales of about \$9 million. Fyfe, who had a big-business background, put in place a new organizational structure for the company, which now has 450 workers and is targeting \$16 million in sales this year, up from about \$11 million in 2003, when Fyfe was promoted to president.

The company, which trimmed its name to Blue Plate last year, now has four divisions—Blue Plate Events, Blue Plate Weddings, Blue Plate Direct, and Events and Meeting Planning by Blue Plate—each with its own manager, Web site and marketing programs.

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"There was a need to become a more efficient operation," Fyfe said, and the new structure gives more focus to each business unit.

Still, many workers initially resisted Fyfe's idea of creating separate divisions within the company.

For the 15 salespeople who were used to selling across the company's offerings, from wedding planning to corporate box lunches to full-scale corporate events, it meant rethinking the way they did their jobs.

"A lot of people got the long-term vision, but there were some who didn't" and left the company, she said.

Winning people over was a huge hurdle for Fyfe. "It was emotionally draining. I was looked at as the bad guy."

Today, with a big-company mentality, Blue Plate offers its employees more benefits than ever.

The company matched part of workers' 401(k) contributions last year and also launched an employee-of-the-year award. It uses a pay-for-performance compensation model, in which employees earn annual bonuses if they meet specific goals. The perks have helped bring a spirit of camaraderie, Fyfe said.

Those benefits are more generous than most niche players can afford.

"Catering is dominated by smaller mom-and-pop operations," said Hudson Riehle, senior vice president of research at the National Restaurant Association in Washington, D.C.

Most rely largely on their reputation and word-of-mouth referrals.

Gerty Leong, for example, started Sun + Moon Catering in Chicago in 1996 as an outgrowth of her Wicker Park deli. The corporate breakfast and lunch catering business grew so quickly, Leong closed the deli to focus on catering.

In a good week, she will prepare and deliver 600 meals using fresh ingredients, vegetarian items and lean sauces made with less oil and mayonnaise than usual, Leong said. As a result, she has picked up jobs with health-care and pharmaceutical companies, in addition to the general business clients that gave Leong her start.

By delivering the meals personally, Leong gets to know her clients, and she claims a 99 percent retention rate.

In addition, most new clients are referred by existing ones. It's largely because of her attention to details, she said. Leong, who began her career as an architect, pays particular attention to meal presentation.

"I'm very aware of color and shapes and what appeals to the eye and the palate," she said.

Still, all of Leong's work in the kitchen and with clients means less time to spend on the business' long-term strategy.

"It makes it difficult to think about the company. By the time the afternoon rolls around, I have to start prepping for the next day," she said.

But Leong is moving in a new direction with the addition last month of a full-time marketing and sales manager.

Hiring management often takes a psychological leap for the entrepreneur, Chadha said.

"The hardest thing is letting go the first time," Chadha said. Entrepreneurs "have to challenge themselves to trust someone else."

While Horan said he's still trying to get used to his new role of chief executive at Blue Plate, his ownership involvement in two Chicago restaurants—Rhapsody at Symphony Center and the Park Grill at Millennium Park—provides plenty of distraction.

Still, he remembers fondly his early days as a "one-man band" catering to film crews and other customers.

"I wish I could be greeting every customer, making all the food. I miss that part of it," he said.



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