

NEW BUSINESS MINNESOTA

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Photos by Paula Keller

Special Report

Resource Heroes

New Entrepreneurs Often Need the Resources of Key Business Professionals to Succeed. New Business Minnesota Brings You Four Stories About **Resource Heroes** You Should Know and How They Helped Clients Reach Their Goals: *Dakota County Technical College, TLC Financial, Inc., TrafficMills and Thompson Patent Law Office.*

Resource Heroes

Nobody
Succeeds in Business
Alone, Especially Not New
Businesses. They Often Rely on
Professionals with Specific Skills of
Services They Need to Launch and
Grow Their Enterprises. They Turn
to Their **Resource Heroes:**
Business Professionals Who Have
Made a Significant Difference In
the Success of Their Clients.
Here We Present Four Such
Examples.

RESOURCE HERO



Jovan Palmieri of BackSafe Systems and Craig Thompson of Thompson Patent Law Office

Thompson Patent Law Office

Helping a Fireman Protect His Life-Saving Idea and Prepare It for Market

New Business Minnesota

All St. Paul firefighter Jovan Palmieri wanted to do was save lives. He had an invention in mind to do that. After talking to a number of patent attorneys, he was beginning to doubt he would ever reach his goal. Then he met Craig Thompson.

Unlike the first attorneys he met with, Craig didn't start talking about retainers and fees or inquiring about how much money he had, recalled Jovan. "He was interested and excited in what I had. I could see the wheels in his head turning, similar to what I was experiencing. He looked at what I had and wanted to know my story and was excited about it."

The founder of Thompson Patent Law Office listened intently as Jovan talked about his invention that could help avert backup deaths caused by fire trucks, dump trucks and other heavy equipment that have difficulty backing up safely.

Jovan recalls his first meeting with Craig. "It was like night and day compared to the other attorneys. We hit it off right away. He was easy to talk to and I had a good comfort level. He didn't pressure me," says Jovan, who is the inventor and founder of BackSafe Systems.

"He gave me time to go through what my invention was and he could see that I was trying to save lives with my product and he appreciated that. When I got home, I told my wife that I found my patent attorney."

The idea behind the invention came in 2009. Jovan had been a firefighter for about seven years, when he became a driver on one of the big fire trucks. He was constantly backing up these huge emergency vehicles in the dark, surrounded by smoke and multiple flashing lights.

"It's tricky," Jovan says. "I was always worried about running over one of the spotters who help me back up."

So he started to read up on backup accidents and found that

there are more than 300 deaths each year. Most of the time drivers and spotters use hand signals and shouting to communicate in a chaotic environment. Backup accidents are the most common accidents in the trucking industry. The backup alarm can help, but at a busy construction site, the alarms are so ubiquitous that they are often ignored.

Jovan's idea was to put in the spotter's hand a wireless wand that is linked to lights and camera monitors in the truck's cab. The spotter could instantly send signals for left and right, stop and go to the driver, replacing the hand signals.

When the driver shifts into reverse, the red lights go off in the cab and on the wand. This clearly indicates to the spotter that the driver intends to back up.

"At first I didn't even realize I was inventing something," Jovan says. "I was just trying to make the spotter more visible. Then I realized that this could become an industry standard on trucks everywhere. I talked to my wife and family about it and they all said I should get a patent to protect the idea.

Once they started working together, Craige laid out the process. "I usually like to start by asking about goals, what they are trying to achieve, even before we get into much detail about the invention."

Craige says that is an important step. He asked Jovan if he wanted to start a business or get the patent so he could sell or license it. Jovan says he loved being a fireman first and foremost and wasn't interested running a business.

So Craige began pursuing a patent that would protect the idea, keep competitors away and be solid enough that investors or licensees would feel secure in participating.

Craige conducted patentability studies on the concept. Is it unique, would the product infringe another patent, does it provide an opportunity for someone else to sue? This kind of preparation can help avoid future litigation.

"You have to play offense and defense," says Craige. "Offense is protecting your idea. Defense is protecting against those who think you are infringing on their patent in which you might be forced to redesign or pay a royalty...It's hard to get investors or sell a license if you're being sued."

The quality of the patent is also critical. "We actually trademarked the term 'Litigation Quality Patents,'" says Craige. "Sophisticated investors will have their own patent attorney check it out before they invest. That's an audience who will scrutinize the patent, and it is a hurdle you have to get over to be successful. Then we focused on the commercially valuable choke points to protect the features competitors will want to copy."

Aside from providing legal services, Jovan says it was invaluable to have Craige on his team. Craige is also a Professional Engineer (PE), electrical engineer and has completed substantial coursework toward an MBA.

Through his connections, Craige made arrangements through a professor friend at Minnesota State University in Mankato to have engineering students take on developing a prototype as part of their senior project.

Then Craige introduced Jovan to an electronics engineer he knew, someone in manufacturing. "Craige took on this project almost as a teammate," says Jovan. "We had a lot of coffee meetings and phone calls along the way and he didn't charge me for those things like a lot of attorneys would have."

In short order, the Minnesota State University students had created a complete, working prototype for about \$800 to cover parts, rather than \$10,000 it otherwise might have cost.

That set the stage for the biggest opportunity Jovan has had to date. With Craige's help and encouragement, Jovan entered his invention in the Minnesota Inventors' Congress in Redwood Falls in 2010.

He couldn't have entered the competition without the prototype and a preliminary patent. "I was able to compete and set up a booth to show my working invention."

Jovan ended up winning a gold medal as one of the top five inventions. His invention was also judged to be the best of show and was awarded the Robert F. Starr Grand Prize for 2010 and \$1,000 toward further developing his invention. The Inventors Congress win helped garner the attention of investors and connected Jovan with companies that are interested in BackSafe's potential to market.

"If it hadn't been for Craige, it wouldn't have been possible," says Jovan.

"Craige was very much an advisor to me. He helped me to think about how many systems I could sell, how much it would cost to build, how many fire departments and trucks could benefit."

"I really consider him to be my friend, not just my patent attorney. His integrity and character and his background in electronics engineering brought great value to my invention. I look at my patent application and I'm just blown away."

"When I worked in the bigger law firms," Craige says, "the extra things – the lunches to stay in touch, the casual coffee meetings – aren't always possible. I like the freedom to deliver a concierge service to start-up clients. I enjoy doing it. I really enjoy helping them, not just with their patent issues, but also with clarifying their goals.

"I like to work with people like Jovan who are trying to build a business around a core technology where I can be a sounding board and an advisor." - NBM

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RESOURCE HERO



Christine Pigsley, Business and Entrepreneurship Instructor at Dakota County Technical College, and David Hartnett, owner of the Dunn Bros. Coffee Shop in Farmington.

Dakota County Technical College

Preparing a Student Entrepreneur to Grab the Unexpected Opportunity

New Business Minnesota

When graphic designer David Hartnett entered the entrepreneur program at Dakota County Technical College (DCTC), he just wanted to turn his part-time company into a full-time enterprise. Instead, he discovered how to evaluate opportunity and wound up owning a now thriving coffee shop.

It all happened so fast, David recalls. He had been laid off from a marketing company and with the aid of a displaced worker program, thought he would take some classes at DCTC that would help him grow Klug Designs, a side business he had run for a number of years.

"I had the graphic talent on the left side of the brain, but nothing on the business side," David says. He wanted to learn how to market to other entrepreneurs, small businesses and

non-profits. He didn't know what he should charge for his services. He wanted to learn how to run a business, from accounting, customer service, legal, sales to financial bootstrapping.

Working out of his home, David spent a lot of time studying and meeting clients at the Dunn Brothers Coffee Shop near his home in Farmington. Then he found that the store was going to close. The manager asked if he might be interested in taking it over.

"Because of my education at DCTC, I was able to quickly figure out what was wrong with the franchise and how to fix it," says David. "The owners were not active. They owned the surrounding mall and put the coffee shop in to drive traffic and help sell retail space. What was lacking was marketing, which I already knew."

It didn't take him long to put his new business planning

skills to use. He figured out how many cups of coffee he'd have to sell to make it profitable and found he could add beer and wine to cater to non-coffee drinkers. The service was good and the product was great.

"The analysis helped me make a quick decision," David says, giving credit DCTC as a great resource for new and growing business owners.

It didn't take long to put the deal together. He negotiated with Dunn Bros., met with the president, who came out to the Farmington location to give input, created a solid marketing plan, a business plan with a vision of where he wanted the business to go.

Christine Pigsley, Business & Entrepreneurship Instructor at DCTC, wasn't surprised at David's decision to buy the franchise. "We are teaching students how to be entrepreneurs and how to take on an opportunity when it comes," she says. "If he had just come for a three-hour class on QuickBooks, he might not have jumped on the opportunity in Farmington."

Christine was referring to the Business Entrepreneur Program, an 18-credit, two-year certificate that David took. A key component of the program is the fundamentals of business planning. Students often start the class with multiple ideas and they want to find out which one to pursue first. After they write two or three plans at the same time, one emerges that is stronger than the rest.

An important part of the classroom atmosphere is how students, who are often age 30 and beyond, challenge each others' ideas, offer alternatives and serve as sounding boards for each other. It's a very engaging, supportive environment, she says.

Christine says that in addition to classroom training, the campus runs a Small Business Development Center (SBDC) in partnership with the Small Business Administration that provides educational services for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs.

David sought out SBDC counseling for his design business. "I remember him wanting to grow his presence and improve his business by developing a business-to-business marketing plan. We became a good sounding board for him and helped him make connections with the right people on campus and beyond."

Recognizing the real-world needs of students and graduates like David, DCTC has created a number of opportunities for students and graduates.

One is the Strive Business Growth Center, our virtual incubator for home-based entrepreneurs who often don't want to set up an office.

"They like being home based," Christine says. "Sometimes they need a more professional presence where they can meet clients. This gives them an opportunity to have the work space on an hourly basis and have a business address at our campus. Their mail comes here. They meet with clients here. They can use our conference room space, copy machines, projectors or other equipment."

Many students have day jobs and business family lives, which is why DCTC offers interactive classes online that can

be just as rewarding and long term as when they sit together. The key for students is flexibility and an educational format that works best for them.

David was a fairly typical student, says Christine. About one third come in with a specific need: marketing, selling, accounting. They generally take the class and see how it works. Then they come back for more. Some students have the GI Bill or can access federal financial aid to pay for the full curriculum.

Many students who recently started a business just want to take a class on financial management or marketing. Some decide to take a comprehensive class approach to help deal with a problem they are struggling with: Monday night is learning how to sell and Wednesday is how to market.

David said every class he took was intensely practical: "In my business, it's really helped: How to get new customers and how to hire good employees. It's real education. Real results.

"In today's market, you need knowledge that is down and dirty. I've been to college before, but here I need to know something quick. Rather than study about company X and its widget problem, you are actually working on your business as part of the class. There are 20 other students who each have their own business – a bed and breakfast, a restaurant – and you get great feedback."

David says he would advise any startup to take classes to fill in the areas where they are weak. If not classes, seek out people you admire in your industry that you can talk to or go to seminars. "Starting a business takes work, a lot of decision making and risk taking," he says. "I don't know where I would be without DCTC."

Christine says that the college works hard to develop lasting relationships with students. "We may have been a resource hero to David, but he has turned into one for us," she says.

"He now sits on our entrepreneurship advisory board and is working with us to support other business owners in topical speaker series and other events that support business owners. David is a guest lecturer for a number of classes, volunteers his talent to the school in design, printing and special events."

NBM

Christine Pigsley is a Business & Entrepreneurship Instructor at Dakota County Technical College and a counselor at its Small Business Development Center. For more information on entrepreneurial course offerings of particular interest to new and small business owners and financial aid questions, she can be reached at (651) 423-8231 or christine.pigsley@dctc.edu. www.dctc.edu.

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RESOURCE HERO



The Commercial Steam Team: Russ Sr., Russ Jr. and Ryan Zakariasens, and Sharol Lehnertz of TLC Financial, Inc.

TLC Financial, Inc.

Helping a Growing Client with Accurate Financials and Solid Business Advice

New Business Minnesota

Sometimes a new business can be its own worst enemy by trying to take on every task. Filled with optimism, enthusiasm and a drive to succeed, the entrepreneurs behind the Commercial Steam Team carpet cleaning service didn't want to make that mistake.

As they were launching their business, they made sure they hired a key professional resource: accountant and business advisor Sharol Lehnertz of TLC Financial, Inc. She was the steadying force they wanted – the cool head of an accountant – to keep their business going in the right direction. She challenged their assumptions and projections and gave them the financial tools needed to chart their progress.

"I'm not sure we'd be where we are today without TLC,"

says Ryan Zakariasen, co-owner of Commercial Steam Team (CST) with his father Russ Sr. and brother Russ Jr.

"When they started the business, they were so optimistic," Sharol recalled. "Right off the bat they bought a new van and hired people and part of my role was to be the voice of caution and make sure they had the financial information they needed as they were growing. When times were tough, I advised them to reduce their compensation. When things picked up, so did compensation.

"Sometimes, when you're first starting up, you need someone to be accountable to," says Sharol. "Russ and Ryan didn't have a board of directors. I held them accountable. I would give them assignments and then follow up if I had to."

CST had known from the beginning in 2003 that they would need an accountant, but they hadn't anticipated the

kind of financial and business advisory services they found with Sharol. She has helped them grow from operating out of Ryan's basement and one truck on the road, to three trucks and six employees with 3,200 square feet of space in an office/warehouse.

What Russ wanted was to be in charge of running the business. He wanted an accountant who could take care of everything except for invoicing, which he wanted in house for quality control. He didn't know he would end up with someone who would also be involved as an advisor and counselor. Oh, and they also got Sharol's husband Bill, who has a separate business as a benefits specialist. (Bill was named a Five Star Business Insurance and Benefits Professional by *Twin Cities Business* in 2010 and 2011.)

"When we first met Sharol and Bill, we knew it was going to work out right away," said Russ. "Sharol is very talkative and personal, more so than most accountants I know. She asked all kinds of questions about our family and the business."

With all prospective clients, Sharol starts off with a free consultation to identify what they need and what they can afford. Some only want monthly financial reports for a flat fee, some need only bookkeeping or tax help.

"The first question is 'what is your story?' I want to know who these individuals are, what their dreams are and why they started the business," she says. "The next question is about their end strategy." Along the way they talk children, balance, retirement, business entity...everything.

All that talking has paid off, says Russ, who got exactly what he wanted.

Sharol says she set up their invoicing so they can track where the revenue comes from: fabric protection, cleaning or moving furniture. They can also track the costs of various cleaning solutions and other materials.

Because of the rising cost of gasoline, Sharol convinced CST to add a fuel charge based on mileage from their Burnsville office. Every little thing helps.

Sharol also took on the task of setting up all the sales tax codes for Minnesota, Minneapolis, downtown Minneapolis and about a dozen other sales tax jurisdictions in the Twin Cities and Wisconsin. Simplifying was essential.

Each month, Sharol reconciles their financials, creates reports that show the highs and lows of the month, compares those results with last-month and the year-ago results, looks at the year-to-date information, and tracks their SBA loans and personal shareholder loans and more.

The process requires that CST invoice its customers and then fax everything else to Sharol at TLC Financial. "We enter everything, so we have all the receivables and paid invoices. We stay on top of what is being paid, to whom and why," says Sharol. "We are their cloud."

She says TLC tries to be more than a "number service." When there are important decisions – buying equipment, hiring another employee – Sharol is included in the discussion.

"Sharol is almost a mother figure to us," says Russ. "She's very protective and wants us to succeed."

Once a year she goes through the numbers with CST's owners – like a board meeting with the principals. "I want to know

what the business is doing, where they want to go, future growth plans and how to manage it all through this economy," Sharol says.

She talks to her clients just about every week and in person two or three times a year. Says Russ: "She's on my speed dial."

Although Sharol has an affinity for numbers, she admits her desire to help people is what really drives her business. "I know my clients well...when they are sick, what's going on and I really care. I was a cheerleader from the time I was 12 and I believe there are no failures in this world, just things that need to be tweaked."

She goes to clients' weddings and funerals. She helps them find plumbers and carpenters. One time she even helped a client find a priest. "We discuss widowhood, childbirth, bankruptcies. Everything with numbers involves people," says Sharol.

Ryan says she redefines what a business relationship is. "She is very hands on when you need it. We trust her completely," he says. She has helped him find employees – her son worked with CST prior to attending law school – and she has made numerous referrals for new customers and professional services such as payroll.

When they needed health insurance, Sharol brought in her husband Bill to talk about the options open to them.

"One of our goals, from the beginning, was to share 10 percent of our profits with employees. It's not just a nice thing to do, but is important for retaining our employees," says Ryan. It took a while to be profitable, but she set up financial targets and parameters that let them know when they could achieve that goal.

TLC has become an indispensable resource for Russ and Ryan. "Bill and Sharol are arguably the best networkers I've ever met," says Russ. "They know someone in every line of work. When have a job open, they have someone. If we need a vendor, they know someone. In our first year of business, they hooked us up with the landlord of their office building. She'd refer you to a restaurant if you were hungry. She seems to know everything about everybody."

NBM

Sharol Lehnertz is president of TLC Financial, Inc. In addition to being an accountant, she is an Enrolled Agent (EA), a designation that qualifies her to do IRS representation such as preparing and filing documents, communicating with the IRS, and representing taxpayers in matters involving the IRS in every state and U.S. territory. TLC Financial also has two CPAs on staff that do individual and corporate taxes. Her husband, Bill, provides employee benefits services to TLC clients through his financial services company. She can be reached at (952) 948-1105 or sharol@tlcfinancial.com.

www.tlcfinancial.com

For more information on the Commercial Steam Team upholstery and carpet cleaning and to reach Russ and Ryan Zakariasen, call (952) 891-3022 or go to

www.commercialsteamteam.com

RESOURCE HERO



Jeff Mills, TrafficMills, and Rob Smith, The Body Project.

TrafficMills, Internet Marketing

Driving Internet Traffic to a Fitness Company and Being No. 1 in Google Searches

New Business Minnesota

Rob Smith has always been in great physical shape. His personal training business, however, was flabby and desperately in need of a major internet marketing overhaul if it was going to help lift him to the next level of success.

The first web site for The Body Project studio was very basic, Rob recalled. “We put a lot of time into making it look good. We thought that if we just had a web site, people would find us. Wrong. The site was basically like having a billboard in the middle of the Sahara Desert.

“After consulting with Jeff Mills, now it’s like we’re in Time Square. Night and Day. I didn’t realize the power of using the right keywords and how they impact your search ranking. If you’re not on the first page of a Google search, you’re losing a lot of money. Having our website optimized for search engines gave us a dramatic increase in our business.”

The difference was finding the right resource: Jeff Mills,

president of TrafficMills, an internet marketing and search engine optimization company that helps businesses get more online and offline buying customers.

What Jeff did for Rob was to make sure that anyone looking for a personal trainer or fitness boot camps in or near Eagan would find The Body Project as the top ranked result.

“The goal is not just the high ranking,” says Jeff, “but to drive BUYING visitors to customer’s web sites.” When TrafficMills builds sites for clients, we can also create a Facebook Fan Page, Optimize their Google Places listings, write content and submit it to other sites getting them more backlinks, conduct press release marketing, create online videos and make commercials for their business too. By optimizing those videos, they end up all over the web, bringing more buyers to people’s sites.

“We become the content machine for local businesses that don’t know how to create or don’t have time to create their marketing pieces. Most business owners don’t understand marketing online. We want them to focus on what they do

best, and we'll handle the rest" Jeff says.

If you spend even a few minutes with Jeff and Rob you can tell they like each other; lots of kidding, laughing and camaraderie. They met at the Midwest Super Conference, an event Jeff created to bring together internet marketing speakers from all over the country.

Rob attended to learn more about online marketing. He was talking to one of the speakers and mentioned that he was a corrective exercise specialist. The speaker said he spent a lot of time slouched in front of a computer and had neck and back pain. So, Rob did a few adjustments to him that did the trick. Word got around to other presenters and he worked on them, too.

"They all had horrible posture," Rob says. "That inspired him to do video course called "Better Posture Guaranteed." He added an eBook version and had DVD and CDs for sale online. "A lot of marketers were using it and I was getting tons of referrals." Rob has videos on Youtube with over 60,000 views.

Jeff followed up with Rob after the event a few months later and heard about his new products and he invited Rob out to be a speaker at a future conference. They started talking and that's where their friendship began and when TrafficMills added The Body Project as a client.

When Jeff first looked at his new client's web site, he could see there was work to be done. It was a basic, static website that was pretty.

Although there was an excellent selection of "before" and "after" photos documenting the amazing results achieved by Rob's clients at his fitness studio, there were no tools for capturing information from visitors other than the fitness studio's email and phone information. There were also no calls to actions or any direct response triggers to "call us or buy now."

Doing a Google search with the common keywords – "personal trainer Eagan, fitness boot camps," etc. – was a bust. The Body Project appeared on the fifth page.

"Jeff said we had to convert our html website to a WordPress blog publishing platform and really focus on our keywords and content," Rob says.

"What Jeff did was incredible. We went from a page five listing on Google to page one, listing number one, almost overnight. Now our web presence is very strong and we dominate for our key words. As a result, most of our clients are from the web or referrals."

At the first meeting, Jeff showed Rob several web sites he built with WordPress and how they ranked.

"I did research on the words that would help him get ranked, evaluated his competition and determined we how could dominate the search engines. And we optimized his Google places so he shows up on the map at the top of the search. He was instantly on the map," says Jeff.

"For keywords, we focused on his niche: personal training and fitness boot camps. Then we re-built the web site so the keywords appeared throughout the web site, including title tags, description tags, and in articles he created displaying his excellent content."

Jeff says that building an effective site was made easier because Rob loves to write good educational articles on being fit and healthy; plus he has instructional videos. "He's a content machine. The search words may bring people to his site, but his

content is like fly paper that keeps them there. When he puts an article on his blog, it drives people to his web site."

When the new site was completed, there was a huge spike in Rob's business and he had to expand his facilities.

When you arrive at the web site, it's interactive. You are offered a free report on "Top 5 Weight Loss Screw Ups" in exchange for registering and providing your email. That request goes to an auto responder and every three days they get a new report from Rob about fitness and health as well as upcoming boot camps, seminars or specials. The autoresponder does the educating and selling, so Rob does not have to.

The web site also features video testimonials. "When other people speak about you and your services, instead of you telling people, it's powerful," says Jeff, who taught Rob how to collect testimonials and use them in his marketing as social proof.

"Jeff taught me that the first mission of internet marketing is to get people into your marketing funnel and follow up with an automated process," says Rob. "Once you get them to look at what you have, you can continue to talk to them right then or at a better time." Using these techniques, Rob regularly draws 20 or more people to his boot camps and has become the premiere personal training and boot camp studio in the metro area.

Because the site was built on WordPress, Jeff says Rob is able to maintain and update his site without any help. WordPress' tools make it easy to make changes, add social media, update content, etc. "He's not controlled by a developer's time schedule or rates," says Jeff. "I'm a big believer in you owning your own site and all the pieces."

Rob makes his living pushing people beyond what they think they can do. He likes that Jeff pushes him the same way. "The thing I really love about working with Jeff is that I start talking about stuff and he says, 'You're thinking too small.' If I want to do X, Jeff says I should do X times 10. He thinks outside the box and is always six months ahead of the curve."

Next up for The Body Project is the world of mobile apps for the iPhone, Android and mobile-friendly websites for smartphones, says Jeff. "Back in 1994, businesses were told they needed a website. Some dismissed it as a passing fad. Today, all serious businesses have a web site. The same thing is happening with mobile apps.

"Businesses will be left in the dust if they don't embrace the power of their own app on their customer's phones. This is our newest service that is taking off like a rocket! We are building 10-20 apps for businesses per week."

NBM

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