

By Working ON the Business: SBDC Helps Dalton Manufacturer Change Slow Sales Into Significant Growth

Almost a decade ago, Scot LaVelle approached the Dalton SBDC office looking for strategies to improve sales at his company, Niche Graphic Flooring. Early in his sessions with consultant Jerry Sims, LaVelle realized that his company was positioned to grow in a much larger and more meaningful way than a simple profit and loss column would suggest.

“Originally, we were concerned about stagnant sales, government issues, taxes, etc.,” says LaVelle. “How could we compete with the largest companies if ours was among the smallest? At about the same time I met Jerry, I had come to understand that we’re blessed with a lot of resources others don’t have.

“There were companies going out of business then, as today. Being a good steward is being willing to risk something big to make something good. Our mindset changed from being risk averse to wanting to create jobs to replace those being lost.

“We needed to grow the business, which meant understanding things differently than I had,” he says, “and being profitable was central to being sustainable. For an entrepreneur, stepping out and trusting others is essential. We are used to just trusting in ourselves. The credibility of the SBDC and Jerry’s easy manner made this easier.”

Sims says companies that have several employees and have been in business for awhile typically need a lot of fine tuning. Since 2000, Sims has consulted with LaVelle in the areas of strategic planning, market development, finances and budgeting, accounting and standard costing. Drawing on the broad experience of the SBDC, Sims at various times enlisted the help of consultants Ron Simmons, Lynn Vos, Darrel Hulsey, Bob Thiele, Sharon Macaluso and Rick Martin for their expertise.

“The first area we generally look at is accounting,” says Sims. “Understanding and managing production costs is a major challenge for most small businesses because they don’t have cost accounting departments like the larger companies. We developed a standard accounting system that allowed our client to fully account for his company’s direct costs.”

“Every SBDC consultant walks through the door with a different perspective, so their combined resources are very similar to going through an expensive MBA program – without the costs,” says LaVelle. “Their ability to make me focus on the key issues may very well be the number one reason our company has built a new manu-



FINE TUNING: A visit to the SBDC helps spur a decade of growth for Scot LaVelle’s company, Niche Graphic Flooring.

facturing facility, increased our employment and sales, and made major investments in equipment, technology and inventory. The quality of their advice made a significant difference.”

Sims says that the process he took LaVelle through is important for all business owners. “You’ve got to look beyond just working IN the business. Scot has been proactive in working ON the business. He will break away from daily details and think about where he wants to go and how he’s going to implement it. He’s got his staff involved in this way of thinking, too, which all companies need to do to survive and grow.

“We’re looking for organizational synergy – it’s not just a one-man show. He’s trying to get everyone proactive and thinking on the right page,” says Sims.

LaVelle wrote a letter to UGA President Michael Adams in the spring to offer his gratitude for the state’s continued investment in the SBDC. “With rising unemployment, many will look to being self-sufficient by starting their own businesses. SBDC and its professionals can be vital in assuring the success of many, many new businesses and helping Georgia’s economy rebound,” he wrote.