



Tip Box

Eliminate collection woes by doing a credit check

When granting credit to customers, many collection problems can be eliminated before they happen through investigation and use of prudent judgment.

There are three factors to consider in evaluating a credit applicant.

- The applicant's ability to pay, based on income and obligations.
- Willingness to pay, based on credit history.



• Potential profitability of the account.

How much do you stand to lose if the

account is not paid?

A quick evaluation can be made based on the applicant's stability — the length of continuous employment and residence.

As the owner of a small business, you must combine facts about the applicant with common sense to determine those risks that appear reasonable.

—Meir Liraz, BizMove.com

Attitude is paramount in assessing a candidate

In hiring, remember it's easier to teach new skills than to change attitudes.

To find employees with great attitudes, the following guidelines may help:

- The best you will ever see is the first 90 days. If you have problems with an employee while he is still on probation, you might as well cut bait.



- If he complains about his last boss, he will complain about you, too. People who blame are difficult to coach.

- Is he coachable? How receptive to feedback does he seem to be? It's easy to assess in an interview; offer some suggestions regarding the candidate's resume.

If he is quick to disagree, defend, or actually becomes huffy, he is not likely to welcome your input on more significant matters.

- Does he listen? You can forget all of the above if the potential employee is not a good listener.

—Barbara Barlein

Got words of wisdom? E-mail them to Carolyn Temple, ctemple@bizjournals.com.

Walking through the fire

Atlantic Laser rises from the ashes and comes back stronger

By DIANE FAULKNER
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If experience is the best teacher, Patsy Underwood is a professor. In 1996, her company, Atlantic Laser, in Jacksonville Beach burned to the ground.

Speaking to businesses through organizations such as Women Business Owners and chambers of commerce, Underwood shares how her company not only survived, but grew after her real-life trial by fire.

Like many others, the company, which remanufactures printer toner cartridges and sells office supplies and equipment, had no formal disaster plan in place. Unlike neighboring victims of the fire in a block of connected offices and stores, the then 4-year-old company experienced little down time, losing only one day of business.

Underwood admits a little luck and a lot of common sense brought the company through its first test of corporate fortitude. Basic foundations laid when starting her business supported actions she and her staff took in this crisis.

'A kind of shock'

A friend's early morning call alerted Underwood to the news.

"My friend's husband said he thought he saw smoke coming from my building as he drove to work," she said. "She was being kind."

By the time Underwood and her husband arrived, all they could do was watch with horror.

With the area roped off and firefighters holding Underwood safely away from the building, the Atlantic Laser staff watched "in a kind of shock."

She assured everyone all jobs were safe. "Then, I don't know where it came



Patsy Underwood promised deliveries the day after the fire — and made them.

from, but I said, 'We've got to do something about our customers.'"

Accessing company voice mail through a memory call service, Underwood said she changed the recording, "saying we'd make deliveries the next day."

Underwood bought pens and legal pads and had the staff make notes of what they had been working on while their memories were fresh.

"[We recorded] what we had around our desks, personal items, computers, customer printers," she said.

Then people started showing up.

Underwood's banker and accountant had current furniture and fixture inventories.

"I never even thought to make an insurance claim," she said. "I was just planning to max out all my credit cards and begin again. By the time our insurance adjuster stopped by, the inventories and staff lists helped us."

ATLANTIC LASER

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Underwood collected a check for \$25,000 by 2 p.m. the afternoon of the fire.

A friend offered her desk so Underwood could take care of phone business.

"We went down to her office, called vendors, checked messages, and started ordering and shipping to our home," Underwood said.

Back to business

The next day, Atlantic Laser operated out of the Underwoods' home.

"With cell phones and two land lines ... we returned customer calls to get orders," she said. "We found a place that Wednesday, installed the phone and security system Thursday, and by Friday we moved into the space and manufactured our first cartridge. And the day after the fire, we did make deliveries."

Good luck sometimes offsets bad.

While employees regularly backed up computer files, the backups were kept onsite. Hard copies of other client histories were kept in standard cabinets. A fortuitous ceiling collapse over the cabinets protected paper files from destruction.

Underwood and her staff called every customer to let them know Atlantic Laser was still in business. Using voice mail through the phone carrier rather than an in-house answering machine helped keep the business running.

Diane Faulkner is a correspondent with The Business Journal.

BEING PREPARED

When the smoke cleared, Patsy Underwood found the following tips were helpful in disaster planning:

- Update business licenses and permits.
- Retain an attorney or at least develop a relationship with one to protect your personal and corporate interests and keep you updated on legalities of your industry.
- Retain an accountant, not only to set up bookkeeping procedures, but also to help you maintain important records you'd never think to keep, such as a furniture and fixtures inventory.
- Keep insurance up to date. Know what your policy is and what protections you have.
- Get involved with organizations such as Women Business Owners and the chamber of commerce, not only for the resources available, but also the contacts.
- Have a security system, communicate and practice security procedures and keep them up to date.
- Back up computers and keep backups off site.
- Invest in voice mail that can be accessed when phones are inoperable.
- Attend a disaster-preparedness seminar.