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SMALL-BUSINESS COURSE

Taking it to the next level

Sonoma County entrepreneurs gain valuable information in SRJC class that helps their companies thrive

By CAROL BENFELL
 THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

A 500-page textbook, homework and weekly classes on managing a small business might not be everyone's idea of fun.

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MARK ARONOFF / PD

Marta Koehne, owner of the Hot Couture vintage clothing store in Santa Rosa, sorts a bag of used clothing she will buy for resale in the store on Third and Wilson streets. She's a graduate of the

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The nation's premier association for small business owners!

But the pointers Marta Koehne picked up at the Small Business Development Center's NxLevel Entrepreneur course have helped turn her vintage clothing and costume business into a landmark store on Railroad Square.

Hot Couture at Third and Wilson streets in Santa Rosa has made more money in the seven years since Koehne took the NxLevel course than in the preceding 17 years put together, she said.

"I was never trained in business. I didn't know what to do," Koehne said. "Things I learned from the course made me change some of the ways I did things and some of my business methods."

NxLevel Entrepreneur courses are offered twice a year by the Redwood Empire Small Business Development Center, an off-campus department of Santa Rosa Junior College funded by the U.S. Small Business Administration and the California Community Colleges.

The center hopes to help small businesses thrive -- nationally, 80 percent of small businesses fail in the first five years, and 80 percent of the remaining businesses fail in the next five.

"Our goal is to help businesses contribute to the local economy by helping businesses get started, create and retain jobs and get access to capital," said Lorraine DuVernay, director of the small-business center.

The NxLevel course, a national program, is one of many courses offered by the small-business center. It is aimed at people who already own a business but want to expand it or manage it better.

NxLevel sessions cover the nuts and bolts of running a business, including feasibility studies, planning, organization, marketing, money management, deal-making and finding financing. Local business experts do some of the teaching.

"We blend a nationally based curriculum with local expertise," said Paul Bozzo, a counselor at the small-business center and the NxLevel trainer.

The course and the Small Business Development Center are a natural fit for Sonoma County, which is home to about 20,000 small businesses, according to the county Economic Development Board.

Small Business Development Center program helping independent business owners get the practical know-how they need to succeed.
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"Eighty-five percent of the companies here have 15 or fewer employees. We are a county of entrepreneurs," said Ben Stone, the board's executive director.

One of those entrepreneurs is Ron Dorris, a Santa Rosa electrical contractor, who took NxLevel in 2002 after his business hit a financial wall.

"I couldn't seem to get past that point. I knew it wasn't about twisting wires. It was something about running the business," said Dorris, owner of Ron Dorris Electric Inc.

A Wednesday night session on cash flow "changed our business overnight," Dorris said.

He learned that a company that manages its payables and receivables correctly needs only half as much cash on hand as one that doesn't.

"The next morning, we made sure we paid our bills on time, but not early, and immediately went to work on our receivables," Dorris said. "Over the next three to five months, we worked with all the people we worked with, shortening the cycle between when we got finished and when we got paid for it."

Most small-business owners, like Koehne and Dorris, have chosen to do work they loved, but had to learn the business end of their business as they went along.

One of Koehne's problems had been supply: She couldn't run to a store and buy vintage clothing when her supplies got low. So she had to be ready to pay for clothes without warning when people dropped by to sell them to her. But it was hard to know how much to set aside.

"I tried to figure out cash flow, and what percent of every day's take I should distribute where," Koehne said.

It was an uncertain process until she took the course. "The whole management part of the course was really good," Koehne said.

"It made me look at budgeting and cash flow. It showed me methods businesses could use that worked."

Dorris was equally enthusiastic.

"I'm a huge advocate of this program. I think there ought to be billboards about it," Dorris said. "You learn an awful lot about

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business in a very short time."

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