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Miami Herald Small Business Makeover: SCORE serves up advice for Tastebuds Catering in Broward County

Catering company in Plantation is a family business

Company is on track for \$1.3 million sales in 2015 and has growing pains

SCORE team tells company to first get a handle on finances



Rachel and Larry Gebaide, center, and their sons Chris Gebaide, right, and Michael Mack are the owners of Tastebuds Catering in Davie, founded in 1995. PETER ANDREW BOSCH pbosch@miamiherald.com

Rachel Gebaide wanted to spend more time with her family. So when her eldest son, David, was born in 1984, she started a catering business out of her kitchen. Four years later, she moved to South Florida and began volunteering in the kitchen at Soref Jewish Community Center in Plantation. Gebaide waitressed during the day, and worked out of the community center's kitchen at night, building up her catering business.

In 1995, Rachel and her husband, Larry Gebaide, opened Tastebuds Café and Catering in Oakland Park. They loved the food business, but not the ups and downs of running a restaurant. After a year, the couple sold the restaurant to concentrate on catering.

They took on a lot. Rachel cooked at a summer camp so her kids could go for free. The couple made boxed lunches and walked them around on trays at a Plantation spa, gradually working up to servicing 10 spas a week. They brought catered meals in to the Sports Authority headquarters down the street.

"We were like hamsters on treadmills. There was no consistency," Larry Gebaide said. "We needed to do something to get some stability."

Larry negotiated a deal with the summer camps to supply meals to bring in revenue. A separate arm of the business, Tastebuds Food Service, now services four summer camps from the Poconos to Cincinnati and brings in \$750,000 in a 10-week period.

Tastebuds Catering now handles jobs ranging from a 10-person lunch to a Macy's event for 3,800 people in 20 stores. They are on track for \$1.3 million in sales in 2015.

Rachel serves as president and Larry is chief financial officer. Their sons, Michael Mack and Chris Gebaide, joined the business full time in 2008. In their Davie headquarters and kitchen, Tastebuds has eight full-time employees and uses part-timers as needed.

Running a family business is a challenge, Larry Gebaide said, with emotions often getting in the way. "We have an all-star line-up, but we are underachieving," he said. "If you don't put things in the right place, you will end up butting heads."

Still, after a tough 2008, the company has bounced back with a 40 percent growth in the past two years. Executive chef Diana Rodriguez has joined the family business, and improved the quality and caliber of its services.

Now Tastebuds Catering is suffering growing pains, with leads coming in, but there's no strategic plan on what jobs to take. "We started hit or miss, and made a lot of mistakes," Rachel Gebaide said. "To get to the next level, we have to change."

The Gebaides asked the Miami Herald for a makeover, and the Herald brought in Broward SCORE, a nonprofit with volunteer counselors from the business community who mentor small business owners. The SCORE tune-up team was led by David Harris, director of marketing at Greenway Golf Course Management, whose expertise is operational management, fiscal controls and marketing. Other team members were Nicholas Emanuel Jr., managing partner at East Coast Sales & Marketing, whose expertise is marketing, sales and corporate strategy, and Angelica Love, a certified life coach and business coach with experience in the restaurant industry.

Here is the SCORE team's advice:

Get a handle on finances: Tastebuds needs to know more than just expenses and income. Label costs by job, to know how much each job is costing, Love said. "If you get a better handle on finances, it will take the emotion out of it," Emanuel said. Start with a spreadsheet of costs of commonly used items, he said,

and divert inputting of costs to one person. A monthly profit and loss report for both the catering and food service businesses is a necessity, Harris said. "Have your bookkeeper and CPA work in tandem to keep better track," he said.

Figure out what jobs are profitable: "Identify your target market so you don't waste time chasing events that are not profitable," Emanuel said. Decide if you want to focus on smaller private functions or big corporate affairs, Love said. Determine the best strategic direction for the future, Harris said.

Reconfigure the way jobs are priced: Allocate material, labor and overhead costs to each job, Love said. For overhead, do an average, like 20 percent per job, or look at annual costs for overhead and income, and get a percentage that way, she said. "Then tack on a 10 percent profit," Love said. "That's how you determine the price. You should always run a food business by the numbers."

Set up guidelines: A family business often is run loosely, but as the company grows, it needs to increase accountability to keep operations running smoothly. Put processes in place and make guidelines about expenses, company credit cards, vacation and time on the job, Emanuel said. "You need a fair, predictable way to reward employees," he said. Love suggested a compensation plan that is results based and goal oriented.

Control expenses: Control variable expenses by having employees pay out-of-pocket and submit an expense report. "When people are spending other people's money, they're very free," Emanuel said. "Start from scratch. Have people put in expense reports and have the company give allowances for things like cellphones." Have company credit card and other purchases approved in advance, Harris said.

Get a dedicated outside salesperson: Set measurable sales goals, Love said. "Compensation drives behavior," Emanuel said. "Whatever you want someone to do, pay them for it." Establish relationships with party planners and others who can refer business for a commission, Emanuel said.

Handle incoming calls more efficiently: Tastebuds uses Google pay-per-click, and advertises on wedding sites like The Knot and Wedding Wire. Incoming calls often take 45 minutes to process and price, but don't always pay off. "You need a way of qualifying people when they call, so you don't waste 45 minutes," Emanuel said.

Make an organizational chart: Have key employees list their primary functions, then compare the lists to see how you can eliminate duplication of effort, Harris said. Identify each employee's job, strengths and weaknesses, Emanuel said. Have the CEO — whether it is Rachel or Larry — devote more time to managing the business, and less time working on the minutia, Love said. Think about how much everyone's time is worth. "As you grow, you need job descriptions, so you don't have high-level people doing jobs you can pay someone less to do," she said.

Work on internal communication: Remove the emotion and run the business. "Put structure in your weekly meetings. Have an agenda and stick to an hour or less," Emanuel said. "Meetings are a waste of time unless they are on point." Focus on what people can handle and what is most important to the company, he said. "Make a process, so there's no finger pointing. It's not personal, just business."

The makeover

Client: Tastebuds Catering, 7080 W. State Road 84, No. 3, Davie. The family-owned business caters high-end weddings and events, and has a food service component that services summer camps and rehab centers. The business has eight employees.

Experts: David Harris, director of marketing, Greenway Golf Course Management; Nicholas Emanuel Jr., managing partner, East Coast Sales and Marketing; and Angelica Love, a certified business coach with restaurant industry expertise.

Challenge: To get a handle on finances and make strategic growth decisions.

Advice: Accurately track financials. Put systems in place to price jobs. Set up a more defined corporate structure. Control expenses.

About SCORE

Based in Washington, D.C., SCORE is a nonprofit with more than 12,000 volunteers working out of about 400 chapters around the country offering free counseling to small businesses. There are seven chapters on Florida's east coast, including Broward SCORE, which has more than 60 volunteer counselors.

Counselors from Broward SCORE meet with small business owners and offer free one-on-one counseling as well as dozens of low-cost workshops. See more under "Local Workshops" at www.broward.score.org. To volunteer or learn more about SCORE, go to www.score.org or www.broward.score.org.



SCORE counselor David Harris, director of marketing, Greenway Golf Course Management.

How to apply for a Small Business Makeover

Business Monday's Small Business Makeovers focus on a particular aspect of a business that needs help. Experts in the community will provide the advice. If you would like a makeover, concentrate on one aspect of your business that needs help — corporate organization, marketing, financing, for example — and tell us what your problems are.

The makeover is open to companies in Broward and Miami-Dade counties in business at least two years. Email your request to rclarke@miamiherald.com and put "Makeover" in the subject line.