**Ask SCORE**

 *I’ve owned a successful home security business for a number of years. I put in lots of hours, think I operate efficiently, yet I find myself constantly overwhelmed trying to keep up with what’s going on in the business world and my industry. How do people keep on top of such things?*

 Though days still have 24 hours, and years are guaranteed to have no fewer than 12 months, it does sometimes seem as if the world is turning faster and faster. Patterns, trends and technologies that seemed rock-solid last year can spike in a different direction at a moment’s notice.

 With the right approach to planning, small businesses can thrive amid this hectic environment. Indeed, it’s critical to constantly look ahead and seek out ways to keep pace and, often, anticipate what’s on the horizon. Learning how to anticipate these trends can help keep you current on everything from sales strategies and customer desires to technology tools and the general economy. And the more you test the winds of change, the better your chances of success down the road.

 Staying on top of trends means staying connected. Though it’s easy to be overwhelmed with information today, you can filter out the clutter using customizable tools such as Google Alerts, which monitors the Web for new content about developing news stories, industry activity and local events you’re interested in.

 Groups such as your local chamber of commerce or professional/trade organization frequently update members and the public on key trends and issues affecting regions and/or industries. They also sponsor conferences, seminars and expert speakers who offer the latest information and insights. And because these events are also outstanding forums for networking, you can exchange observations with colleagues who are tracking other business metrics.

 At the same time, don’t make a snap decision just because you overhear someone talking about something. Flexibility is critical in today’s business environment, but so, too, is careful risk management. Investing time in research about a particular trend or opportunity will pay off with a more informed, more confident course of action.

 Though entrepreneurs should always be prepared to embrace new ideas or approaches, there’s still a lot to be said for sticking with the basics. Herm Rowland, who has guided his family-owned Jelly Belly Candy Company through several decades of shifting trends, says he’s always worked by three guiding principles:
• Always maintain quality in products and business practices.

• Tell the truth; be honest.

• Make sure that what you are doing feels right in your gut.

 *This column is brought to you by the Merrimack Valley Chapter of SCORE, with nearly 70 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business mentoring and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit merrimackvalley.score.org for information on mentoring, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.*