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Breakfast Bites: Downtown Business Owners Offer Good Advice to Chew On

By Connie Watson | From *Main Street News* | February 27, 2011 |

Sandra Dronet learned the importance of customer service while selling oil rigs to drilling companies in Texas. When she moved to the Middle East with her husband, this self-proclaimed Diva spent the next chapter in her life traveling the world to learn beauty secrets. After returning to Georgetown, Texas, she blended all of her experiences to start She Etc. International Day Spa and found she had the ingredients for a five-star business.

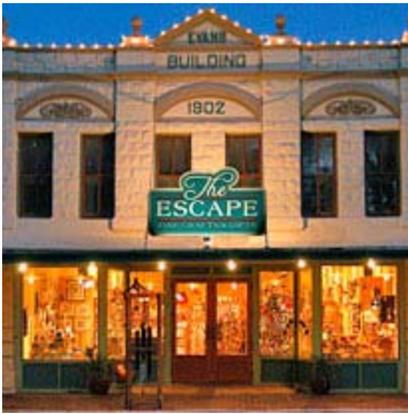
To give successful Main Street business owners an opportunity to share their experience and expertise, Georgetown Main Street Program created the professional development series, "Breakfast Bites." While Georgetown has a population of 53,000 people, Breakfast Bites focused less on networking because most of the participants already know one another. Still, says Shelly Hargrove, the Economic Development Main Street Manager, the event did attract some new people. Some business owners who seldom participate in Main Street initiatives showed up, as did some entrepreneurs who are thinking about starting a new business in Georgetown.

For the first event in February, Sandra, along with two other downtown business owners, Judy Lester and Rusty Winkstern, presented the local business community with their winning strategies for operating successful businesses in downtown Georgetown. The program was designed to help with business retention by giving helpful ideas and tips to entrepreneurs starting or operating businesses in Georgetown.

Each speaker focused on three core areas of any business – customer service, personnel, and marketing. Lester, co-owner of The Escape with her husband Len, has been in retail since she was 14 years old. Over the years she has learned that the best customer service policy is a simple one – make the customer happy. Their strategy is to empower all staff members to help customers with refunds, exchanges, repairs, gift-wrapping, and even local deliveries without getting approval from the owners. Judy and Len are great at customer service, but found they weren't good sales people. Her tip on personnel management is to hire to strengthen your weaknesses and let your employees' skills complement yours.



At the first Breakfast Bites, Georgetown business owners Judy Lester, Rusty Winkstern, and Sandra Donet shared their successful business strategies with other excellent downtown merchants.



Judy Lester, co-owner of The Escape, a shop that sells fine crafts and gifts, focuses on making customers happy by empowering staff to make refunds, exchanges, and repairs without waiting for her approval.

Listening to employees and implementing their ideas was another tip to show employees that they are valued. Lester encouraged the group to maintain a customer list and market directly to them to build repeat business. The Escape, which sells fine crafts and gifts, markets itself on everything that goes out the door – from gift wrapping to free gift cards. Lester also encouraged business owners to maintain a web presence with hours, events, and other relevant information.

A customer who has had a good experience will tell 10 people, but a customer with a bad experience will tell 200, according to Dronet. So her first tip was to know what your customers' experiences are before they go out the door. When you are in the business of pampering people, customer feedback is vital! She stressed the importance of listening to your customers and dealing immediately with their complaints.

The spa owner also recommended that business owners have someone answer the phone so people hear a real person, not a recording. Training staff is another important part of being a business owner. The team must know the owner's expectations. As an employer, business owners should be knowledgeable about employment laws, regulations, and safety. While service industries require employees to sign contracts, Dronet feels that contracts are unnecessary. If you have a good business, your employees won't want to leave. It's important to find out how each client first heard about her business, says Droneet, so she can put her resources into proven targeted marketing methods. Every customer at her door is greeted with the offer of a mimosa, as Dronet feels it is important to go the extra mile to top the competition.

Winkstern, co-owner of the Monument Café, started his first restaurant at 21. He admits that he was an arrogant kid at the time. After someone stuffed a copy of the book *The One Minute Manager* by Kenneth Blanchard and Spencer Johnson under his door, he got the picture. His customer service tips focus on hospitality. Treat every customer as a VIP, says Winkstern. Be friendly, but not overly familiar. When hiring personnel, he spends his time finding Mr. Right, not Mr. Right Now, taking on shifts himself if they are down a team member. Monument Café uses a Decision Triangle made up of staff, guests, and the business. Every decision must be good for all three parties. Winkstern's priorities are staff, guests, community, suppliers, then owners. He feels if you do right by the first four, then the business will be profitable for the owners.



Rusty Winkstern, co-owner of the Monument Cafe urges business owners to take their time when hiring staff. It's essential, he emphasizes, to find Mr. Right, not Mr. Right Now.

Another book Winkstern recommends is *Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business* by Danny Meyer. In the book, Meyer says people are most comfortable in three places – home, work, and a

third place. Winkstern tries to make Monument Café that comfortable third place like a community center. He believes authentic food, service, and atmosphere will get you vital word-of-mouth marketing. It doesn't hurt that his restaurant has already won several awards.

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