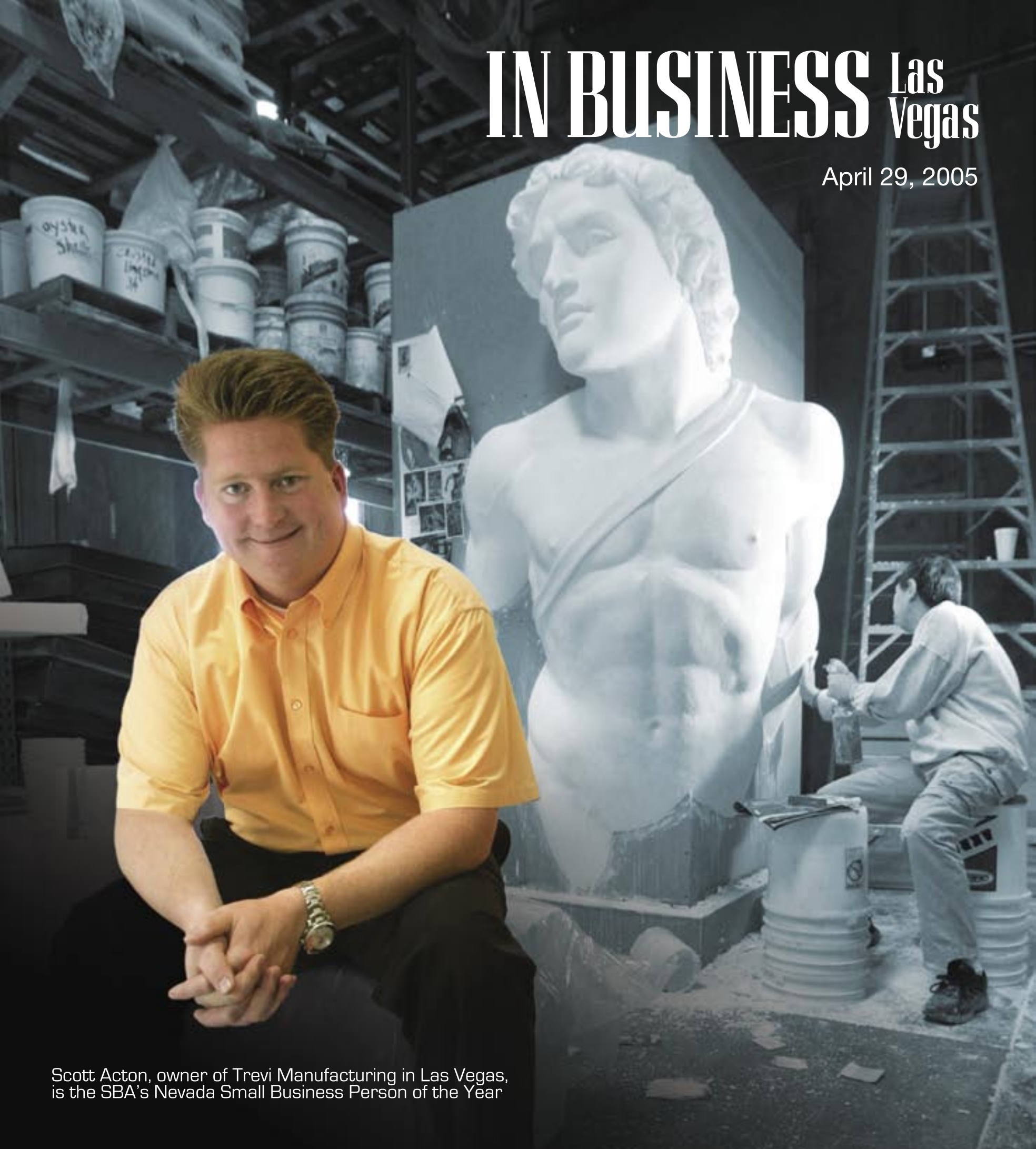


IN BUSINESS Las Vegas

April 29, 2005



Scott Acton, owner of Trevi Manufacturing in Las Vegas, is the SBA's Nevada Small Business Person of the Year

Small Business Guide

A special supplement to In Business Las Vegas

Companies find success in Southern Nevada

By Danielle Birkin
Contributing writer

Small businesses have historically comprised the backbone of the U.S. economy, with Southern Nevada emerging as a Mecca for savvy entrepreneurs. Comparatively low taxes and a swelling population are attracting increasing small businesses to the valley, as evidenced by a recent report by Sales Genie, a business and consumer marketing database operated by infoUSA.

According to the report, which was referenced in a Dec 16, 2004, article in the New York Times, Las Vegas had 46,170 small businesses in 1998, a figure that spiked to 73,163 in 2003, an increase of 58.5 percent, the largest of any metropolitan area in the nation. (The increase in the number of small businesses in the country's top metropolitan areas averaged just 18.6 percent, Sales Genie reported.)

Statewide figures are also impressive. According to a report published by the Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, the estimated number of small businesses in Nevada in 2003 was 166,000, with small business proprietors' income increasing 6.7 percent from \$4.7 billion in 2002 to \$5 billion in 2003, based on information from the U.S. Department of Commerce.

While many of these businesses are

relatively new to the area, and are facing issues related to managed growth and future sustainability, they have been able to launch successfully and take profitable advantage of the favorable business climate that has gained Las Vegas a reputation as more than a hotbed of gaming.

Here are a few of their stories

Transform Data Corp.

According to research firm Coopers & Lybrand, there are more than 4 trillion paper documents in the U.S., a figure that is growing by 22 percent annually.

Tom Talamantez, president and co-founder of Transform Data Corp. — a provider of records and document management solutions, including document imaging and scanning — is helping to reduce companies' reliance on paper, which can help protect valuable documents from getting lost or misfiled, and also enhances efficiency of retrieval and distribution.

But there's one document Talamantez said was paramount in propelling the success of the 2-year-old company, which was founded by six partners with undisclosed personal funds and has grown to 15 employees: a solid business plan.

"I think one of the things that's important is to have a plan — a road map — that outlines where you're going to be over the first five years," he said. "At least having a compass helps you make adjustments on

the fly."

Case in point: When Talamantez and his partners launched Transform Data, they had a conservative plan to roll out all of their services over a three-year period, with additional services and expansion slated for the third year of business.

"But everybody we talked to said 'Your plan won't look the same in a year,' and by necessity, we started out a little faster than we thought we could in fulfilling needs for different customers," he said. "For example, in our initial plan we were only going to distribute hardware and software but as we went down that road we realized the need for additional services, such as blueprint scanning and document imaging, which we were going to add in the second year but moved up by eight months. Now we offer comprehensive solutions for any company for all content within an organization."

Managed growth has also fueled the success of Transform Data, according to Talamantez.

"We started out very small with just the owners working in the company and have gradually taken on employees," he said, adding that managed growth has helped the company make money. "One of the keys to success in that area has been to look at opportunities and to determine if they make sense for the company. There are accounts we can work with, but they might be too big or be in an industry

where we'll get squeezed on the cost: Sometimes your eyes are bigger than your stomach."

Funding in the launch phase is also critical.

"You want to make sure you're going to have operating capital for the first two or three years," he said, adding that new businesses often have difficulty securing bank funding or loans. An enterprise needs to be able to operate on its own for the first two to three years.

Sting Surveillance

Jonathan Fine, owner of Sting Surveillance, attributes his company's success to pure providence.



Fine

"I got lucky," Fine said of the genesis of Sting, a Henderson firm founded in 2002 that provides customized remote digital surveillance and video-monitoring systems, cameras and accessories. "I knew it was an industry that needed help and I kind of jumped into it. I partnered with a guy, and didn't do enough background on him, and he ended up not being as forthcoming as I thought he was. He kind of told me a lot of lies and almost killed everything I was doing before I got started."

Fine's initial \$25,000 investment, for

SEE SUCCESS, PAGE 10A

From the editor



Dear readers,

So, it's a dream of yours to be your own boss. You want the option to work when you want and for how long you want. You crave that freedom.

Blow those stereotypes out of the water ... owning a successful small business takes hard work. There are huge rewards, however, for toiling those long hours.

For the first time, *In Business Las Vegas* is publishing this Small Business Guide as a special section. We have tried to target a couple of different audiences: people who are thinking about venturing into the world of small business and current owners who may be looking for ways to improve their operation and their financial statements.

According to a report released late last year, Las Vegas has jumped from 46,170 small businesses in 1998 to 73,163 in 2003 — an increase of nearly 59 percent. It was the largest jump of any metropolitan area nationwide, proving the valley is definitely a hotspot for entrepreneurs.

In this publication, we have passed along a few success stories that offer some great insight and make for great reading. Additionally, you'll find articles that range from choosing a name for your business to obtaining the necessary capital through various loans to ways of promoting and marketing your new company.

You'll also find a resource guide in this section. It's a compilation of chambers of commerce, government agencies, organizations and assistance centers for small business owners. We hope you'll find these phone numbers and Web sites useful.

Rob Langrell
Editor of Special Publications

ON THE COVER: Scott Acton poses by the 10-foot sculpture of David that his company is creating for Caesars Palace. Photo by Sam Morris / IBLV STAFF.

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Name of the game: Put some thought into business' identity

By **Damon Hodge**
Staff writer

What's in a name? Possibly the key to your business' future.

Janis Stevenson, business development advisor for the Nevada Small Business Development Center, says choosing a good company name can mean the difference between notoriety and obscurity.

"From a marketing and business standpoint, the name should make sense for the type of business you are doing," she said. "The name could become an important part of the marketing plan, so consideration of trademarks and copyrights can be important. People tend to overestimate their (future) profits and underestimate the time it will take for the public to hear about your business, learn about your business, make a decision to try your business and then use your business."

"So, as a rule," she said, "try not to be cute."

Or too aloof. Some business names force people to connect the dots.

"I've met a number of people who have very expensive business cards," said Marcia Hamilton, SBA/business development officer for Bank of Commerce and retired commercial loan officer for the Small Business Administration. "You look at the business cards. You can study it from now to the end of the world, and still can't tell what they do."

"On the business card or promotional piece, there needs to be a short tag line about what it is you do. A flowery phrase that has nothing to do with the fact that you sell peanut butter does no good."

Hamilton recommends this rule of thumb: Ask people the first thought that pops in their head when you mention the

name of your business. If the reaction is negative, consider changing it.

Once you've settled on a name, experts recommend searching local and state business archives to see if the moniker, or some derivative of it, is already in use. Start with the Secretary of State's office (www.secretaryofstate.biz or www.sos.nv.us) and then check with the County Clerk (www.co.clark.nv.us/clerk/clerkhome.htm), which handles fictitious firm names — businesses operating under names different than what's registered with the state. If everything checks out, complete the paperwork and mail it in, along with any filing fees.

A good next step, experts say, is trademarking the name. Though generally done via the U.S. patent and Trademark office, trademarks can be obtained at the state level. State-issue trademarks establish the dates when business names are first used in commerce, which can be particularly helpful in infringement disputes.

"(In trademarking a name) You must be careful not to impinge on someone's else name," said Stevenson, reiterating the need for thorough name searches and creating distinct monikers. "Small businesses everywhere have been hit with cease and desist orders because their names impinged on another, often a larger company."

In general copyrights and patents used to protect original works of authorship such as art, music or literature and products, processes and software, respectively, don't apply to protecting a business' name. However, the former can be an important component in deciding on a name, especially if your company will be dealing with intellectual property, Stevenson said.

Guidelines for selecting a name

- Make the name easy to understand, spell, pronounce, remember and find in the telephone directory listing.
- Project your business image in the name. Include words such as service, speed, quality, skill, low cost, experience, effectiveness, etc., in the name depending on what you emphasize in your business. The type of product or service you provide, such as cleaning, catering, or consulting, should also be included in the name to help the customer remember who you are.
- Remember that periods, spaces and first words such as "an" or "the" will change alphabetical listing of your business in directories. Acronyms or abbreviations can confuse the customer looking for your name in a listing.
- Terms such as "corporation" or "incorporation" should not be used unless your business is incorporated.
- Do not select a name similar or identical to that of another business. It will confuse the customer and anger the other business.

— Source: Small Business Association



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Keeping track of laws help businesses maintain some order

By Danielle Birkin
Contributing writer

Small businesses face myriad challenges in launching and growing successfully. Overlooking labor and employment laws and their effects need not be among them.

Consider compliance with regulations related to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, for example.

"The number one issue citation from OSHA is from the Hazard Communications Standard," said Marilyn Stell, program manager for safety assistance service for the Nevada Small Business Development Center. "What that says is that employers must train employees on any hazardous chemical that they work with or may be exposed to in the workplace."

Stell said chemical manufacturers must supply businesses with Material Safety Data Sheets that contain pertinent details about that chemical and its use, but many business owners are unaware they need to have such information available.

"Another common misconception that small businesses in particular have is that they are not regulated by OSHA unless they have 10 or more employees. That's not true, with the exception of home-based businesses or business that are regulated by other federal agencies," she said. "So what happens is that a small business will hire one or two people and will not think they are regulated. What I find is that they're more concerned with meeting payroll and other issues so safety is not a high priority until something happens, like an injury or fatality at the workplace or they get a visit from OSHA enforcement. Then they don't have anything in place and that's a rude awakening, because if they're not in compliance, OSHA penalties can start at \$7,000 and that can be very devastating for a small business person."

Stell, whose organization's funding is provided through the Small Business Administration through the University of Nevada's School of Business, said many small businesses do not seek assistance from nonprofit agencies such as the Nevada Small Business Development Center, largely because they are unaware they exist.

"So the challenge we have is informing them," she said. "I am grant funded and limited in marketing, so I speak at lunches and training classes anytime I can."

OSHA also has a Safety Consultation and

Training Section that Stell said provides a tremendous amount of free training for small businesses.

"But people are reluctant to utilize them because they are part of OSHA," she said.

William Urga, founder and shareholder of the local law firm Jolley Urga Wirth Woodbury & Standish, identified other issues related to labor law that may affect small business owners.

"One of the more common things that come up is the right of the employee to view his or her personnel records," said Urga, whose practice includes business litigation. "There's a statute that requires that on request an employee has a reasonable opportunity during business hours to inspect the records kept by their employer within 60 days of termination. Many business owners don't realize the employee has that right until the employer gets sued or the Labor Commission comes after you."

Another issue related to labor law?

"A lot of times employers don't make the payment of the last paycheck or they try to withhold money," Urga said. "Under statute, you have to pay them within seven days of them quitting, or a normal pay period. If an employee is fired you have to pay immediately — if they fail to pay within three days of when it became due then the employee has the right to seek wages for the same rate for up to 30 days. These are the kinds of things people don't think about, and when they hear about it they get a little surprised."

Non-compete and confidentiality agreements — in which employees agree not to go to work for a competitor within a certain period of time within a certain geographic area — must also be considered, Urga said.

"As a general rule, they are enforceable, but they have to be scrutinized very carefully," he said. "You don't want to protect people from working, but at the same time you want to protect trade secrets or information that is not commonly known. If I'm a checker at store A and I want to go across the street and work at store B, I'm not revealing trade secrets and there's no conflict, but if I'm the president of store A and want to go across the street to store B there might be a problem."

"Business is different than it was 20 years ago," Urga said. "There are a lot more business requirements, and more complexity related to doing business."

Acton, Trevi nab state’s SBA award

By Danielle Birkin
Contributing writer

Scott Acton is a third-generation sculptor and mold-maker who admitted that a penchant for custom design and construction runs in the family.

“In high school, I went to work for my grandfather, a sub-contractor for Disneyland, fell in love with it and haven’t stopped since,” said Acton, president of Trevi Manufacturing.

Acton moved to Las Vegas in 1993 to work for his father’s sculpture business. “I just didn’t want to work for anyone anymore — I wanted to row my own boat, so I started Trevi five years ago.”

Formerly called Cast in Stone, Trevi specializes in the manufacture of cast concrete products with an emphasis on custom design and construction of one-of-a-kind components used in major architectural undertakings.

Acton’s hard work and perseverance were recently recognized by the Small Business Administration, which named him the Nevada Small Business Person of the Year. He was honored this week in Washington, D.C., during Small Business Week.

“The wonderful success of Scott Acton and Trevi Manufacturing can be attributed to the unique role of small business in the American and world economies which are, simply: find a niche, assess the need, and fill it,” stated John Scott, SBA’s Nevada district director. “Scott Acton saw the tremendous potential and growth of the residential and commercial construction industries in Las Vegas and created fountains, statuary and other landscaping products that bring tranquility and sophistication to an otherwise harsh desert environment. The city is a more beautiful place

because of his innovation and creativity.”

The company’s commercial projects, which range in price from \$20,000 to \$1 million, include a 20-foot, three-headed beast statue that lurks in the lake outside the LeBete nightclub at the Wynn Las Vegas resort.

“He did an exceptional job,” said Roger Thomas, executive vice president of design for Wynn Design & Development. “His cooperation as well as that of his sculptor was amazing. We had a very simpatico rapport almost immediately.”

“All of his custom work for our company has been exceptional and we look forward to a long association,” he said.

Trevi has also created statues, columns and other architectural elements for Caesars Palace, including a 10-foot sculpture of David that will grace the new registration area.

Trevi also designs and crafts decorative fountains, planters and statuary made of lightweight glass fiber-reinforced concrete, as opposed to traditional pre-cast concrete, which is heavy and prone to erosion over time.

“Trevi has developed a process that casts concrete at almost half the weight of standard pre-cast concrete,” Acton said. “Coupled with creative designs, we strive to bring the pleasure of fountains, planters and statuary without hurting anyone’s back.”

Ranging in price from \$300 to \$800, the company distributes these creations to approximately 250 garden stores in Nevada, California and Arizona.

Acton said the company’s foray into the garden products arena was a strategic move that serves as the company’s bread and butter.

“The commercial business goes feast or famine,” he said.

“We either have 10 projects or no projects, so what the fountain business did was give us a strong base and keeps us busy year-round.”

Trevi was launched in an 1,800-square-foot warehouse in Las Vegas and brought in \$40,000 in revenue in 2000. It now has 48 employees, including a sculptor and a caster who have been with the company since its genesis. Trevi recently relocated to a new 35,000-square-foot facility near Las Vegas Boulevard.

“We’ve grown from practically zero to \$5 million in sales,” said Acton, but he said he never anticipated the honors from the SBA. “Not in a million years,” he said, adding that five years of “blood, sweat and tears” apparently paid off. “It was a total surprise and I was honored and flattered.”

The SBA looks at whether a company meets its definition of a small business, which is based on financials and the number of employees. Dan Schoot, creative director of Entropy Group, an advertising agency that has worked with Trevi for about four years, nominated Acton for the honor.

“We met Scott not long after he had started the business,” Schoot said. “It was one of those rare cases where he started from nothing but he had a mountain of initiative and determination to make his business go. Scott’s very resourceful and I think above all he looks to the people around him to make things work. In other words, he doesn’t solely rely on his own ability to make the business run. He surrounds himself with very talented people.”

As for the future of the company, Acton is hopeful Trevi will continue to flourish. “In five years, I see us being nationwide with our garden products. I’m grateful for everything I have and all the jobs I get. I’m just a happy guy and want to continue to grow.”

Solid business plan is road map to success

By Deborah Roush
Contributing writer

Writing a business plan can be daunting. It requires research, can be complicated and is time consuming to complete. But every small business needs one, and the good news is that in Southern Nevada there are many places to turn for help before you put your pen to paper.

“A business plan tells us what direction we’re going, and it’s a place to go back to for review and update,” said John Scott, the Small Business Administration’s District Director for Nevada.

“It’s important internally for every successful and thoughtful business owner. It’s also a tool that’s needed by the network of lawyers, accountants and bankers that will be have to see your vision to support you,” he added.

Getting started

Experts agree that the first step in preparing a business plan is research.



Scott

“The research work that a business owner does before opening the business in critical,” Scott said.

There are books in the business sections at local bookstores priced from \$10 to \$40 that coach business owners on writing high-quality business plans. Computer software programs are available that allow business owners to “pop in a CD” to perfect the narrative of their plan, he added.

In addition, sample copies of business plans available by calling the SBA’s Nevada office or accessing their Web site.

“Ask for a copy of the Nevada Small Business Resource Guide that has great insight on how to structure a business including seeking financing, getting a business license and numerous business partners — including people willing to help with a business plan — either for free or based on standard commercial fees,” Scott said.

Talk to a tax pro

Before you begin your plan you also need to consult with a tax expert. “You need to sit down with a CPA — not a bookkeeper — and or a lawyer about the forming of the legal entity you’re going to choose as

it relates to your personal and corporate liability,” he said.

Once you’re ready to write, how complicated should you make your plan?

“There is no business plan that is ‘the’ business plan. They’re as complex as the nature of the business that you’re proposing or growing,” Scott said, suggesting the writer include bullet points and charts and graphs.

It is critical, too, that business owners begin the process of writing a business plan on their own. “Nobody should go and ask someone else to write it for them. No matter how rudimentary their initial efforts are, they need to go through the inspirational—and perspirational — process of writing the plan, and it can be an arduous process.

“We can give you tools, tips and critique it for you, but you have to start it yourself,” Scott said.

What to include

While every business plan is different, there are a few topics expected in every good plan, Scott said.

“What you’re trying to do is share your vision in a practical way of how you will

start your business and make it a success,” he said.

First, he said, you need a good introduction.

“That should say who are you and what your background is. It should talk about what the business you’re going to form is and its goals. You have to identify that you have the skills and the educational level to succeed.

“This is where you are going to try to sell people on distinct advantages that you will bring to marketplace that potential competitors will not have and what makes your business unique,” he said.

Materials provided by the Nevada Small Business Development Center (NSBDC) suggest that it is easiest to write the introduction last. “This section (as well as all sections in this business plan) must be packaged so that it is easy to understand and verify. This also means making it as short as possible and still covering all areas.

“Remember, the busy investor, banker or other interested business person will not have time nor will want to take time to read anything that resembles a book,” their materials said.

Resource Guide

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- Urban Chamber of Commerce
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- Women’s Chamber of Commerce
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www.womenschamberofnevada.org

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www.stats.bls.gov
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- Clark County Business License
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www.co.clark.nv.us/business_license
- Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Outreach Program
(702) 895-4270
www.nsbdc.gov
- Economic Development of Western Nevada
(775) 829-3700
www.edawn.org
- Federal Grant Resources
(702) 388-6611
www.sba.gov/expanding/grants.html
- Henderson Business Resource Center
(702) 992-7200
www.hendersonbizcenter.com
- Henderson Economic Development Office
(702) 267-1650
www.cityofhenderson.com/ecodev
- Internal Revenue Service
(702) 455-1098
www.irs.gov

- Las Vegas Business Services
(702) 229-6281
www.lasvegasnevada.gov/business_services.htm
- Las Vegas Office of Business Assistance
(702) 229-6437
www.lasvegasnevada.gov/default_577.htm
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- Nevada Department of Taxation
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- Nevada Department of Transportation
www.nevadadot.com
- Nevada Division of Insurance
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- Nevada Gaming Control Board
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www.gaming.nv.gov

- Nevada Secretary of State
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Local chambers meet changing business needs

By Lisa McQuerrey
Contributing writer

Southern Nevada is home to one of the most diversified business environments in the nation. As such, local chambers of commerce are charged with continually evaluating the needs of their complex memberships and striving to develop programs, benefits and political and community outreach efforts to bolster an ever-changing business base.

Today's local chambers are more progressive and proactive than those of the past. Southern Nevada is home to more than a dozen different chambers, some representing specific geographic regions of the valley, others catering to a specific ethnic or gender demographic. While every chamber is dedicated to increasing networking opportunities and encouraging business-building relationships within its membership, each sets its own specific agenda for serving the often-unique needs of those it represents.

"The number one challenge facing every chamber today is ensuring that its products, services and programs are regarded as being relevant to its members," said Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce (LVCC) Vice President, Marketing Mike Varney. "The agenda we have is embodied in our mission statement — to strengthen, enhance and protect business."

Established in 1911, the LVCC is the area's oldest and largest chamber and is the third-largest metro chamber in the nation. With nearly 7,000 members, the LVCC represents companies of all sizes, though 85 percent of its membership is small businesses. The LVCC offers a package of member benefits called "The Chamber Advantage," which includes group health and workers' compensation insurance, discounted office supplies and member-to-member discounts. The organization also touts a strong government affairs division, which represents the interests of business at the legislative level.

"Not every chamber is involved in political advocacy," Varney explained. "But the role government plays can have a drastic effect on business. As an advocate for small business, we profess that low taxes and high government accountability and efficiency is the way to run a state."

Besides its government advocacy, the LVCC is known for its leadership development program, Leadership Las Vegas, and its annual forecasting event, Preview Las Vegas, which brings together local and national experts to provide in-depth analysis of the area's overall economic climate.

The Henderson Chamber of Commerce (HCC) was established in 1945 with a mission of promoting the civic, commercial and industrial development of the city while supporting and promoting member businesses. The HCC also represents its membership in the legislative arena and touts a planned, systematic process for evaluating and influencing political candidates.

The Henderson Development Association and the Legislative Action and Business Action committees implement a number of HCC business development programs. These programs are designed to enhance the city's general business climate. The HCC's Community Development and Community Booster programs address community quality of life issues.

Outside of fast-growing Henderson, the Boulder City Chamber of Commerce works to promote business and commerce through leadership in economic, political and social development. Benefits of membership include mixers, a referral program, business seminars and workshops.

North Las Vegas has experienced a burgeoning growth spurt during the last several years, resulting in an increase in membership for the North Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce (NLVCC). Now more than 700 members strong, chamber CEO Sharon Powers said only 40 percent of its membership carries a North Las Vegas address; 60 percent of members are

based in Henderson or Las Vegas. "With a city as fast-growing and as dynamic as North Las Vegas, people want to tap into the market," Powers said.

The NLVCC has a progressive, hands-on relationship with the city. Its Business Development Alliance collectively focuses on issues related to relocation, business retention and expansion and attracting new business to the area. While Powers noted the chamber's main allegiance is to its members, it considers the larger scope of things when offering assistance.

"If, for example, there's a problem happening to a relocating business that impacts the overall business climate, we will look at it," Powers said. "A strong community equals a strong business community."

Established in 1986, the Asian Chamber of Commerce (ACC) was created to represent the professional and business interests of Nevada's Asian Pacific American population. Its primary goal is to serve as a significant economic force in "bringing about political, social and economic parity" within this community.

The ACC also serves as a forum for helping members understand current business issues and expand professional horizons, all while giving the Las Vegas Asian business community the chance to address important business and ethical issues. The organization's membership supports its main fundraiser, the Bill Endow Scholarship. The ACC also holds monthly luncheon meetings and quarterly business mixers.

With technology making its way into the daily operations of nearly every type of business, the 900-member Las Vegas Internet Chamber of Commerce (LVICC) was established three years ago to address needs specific to both tech and non-tech businesses that use the Internet in daily business operations. LVICC President Charlie Bass said he anticipates growth in membership numbers when Southern Nevada "gets serious about attracting technology."

The LVICC hosts monthly membership luncheons and mixers set around various Internet themes and technology issues. "Ours is not a political organization at all," Bass said. "We help businesses in the area understand and learn how to use the Internet more efficiently and we foster business relationships between members, providing a point of contact in the tech community."

With various chambers finding successful niches in serving particular industries and population segments, the Sin City Chamber of Commerce (SCCC) joined the fray nine months ago with its own specific agenda. Chamber veterans Wayne Bridge and Loretta Holt said they started the SCCC to provide networking

and marketing opportunities for businesses associated with the adult entertainment industry and the gay community. Holt said the group, which now boasts 160 members, 70 percent of which are mainstream businesses, was at first a little apprehensive about pioneering this venture.

The SCCC offers members insurance plans and is working on a competitive group major medical plan.

As Southern Nevada's Hispanic population grows, so too does the Latin Chamber of Commerce (LCC). The LCC provides networking and educational opportunities and helps members learn about bidding on gaming and government contracts and accessing capital. The LCC hosts regular Spanish-language breakfasts and seminars on how to start a business and has an annual business exposition and golf tournament. The LCC is also heavily involved in the community, sponsoring an annual scholarship program, supporting the Arturo Cambiero Senior Center and hosting the annual Latino Youth Leadership Conference. According to LCC executive director Otto Merida, local Hispanic students who benefit from the organization's educational assistance are encouraged to remain in Las Vegas and give back to the community.

Merida said he anticipates seeing the LCC's 1,300 membership double over the next five years, noting that as Hispanics continue to grow in economic power, social and political issues will become all the more important to this segment of the population.

Two other local chambers serve the business needs of a specific segment of the population. The Urban Chamber of Commerce (UCC) has a mission of promoting, encouraging and supporting business growth throughout the state with a special emphasis on the participation of African-American enterprises in local, national and global business markets. Benefits of membership include mentoring assistance, networking events and contacts with gaming, government and private sector firms. The UCC hosts monthly luncheons and regular workshops featuring experienced business owners and speakers. The UCC also advocates for public policies that promote equitable opportunities for minority, female and small business owners.

The Women's Chamber of Commerce of Nevada (WCCNV) was established in 2002 by president and CEO June Beland to assist women business owners throughout the state. The organization was developed to "identify, create and disseminate programs and services to educate businesswomen and others by providing the tools, resources, connections and skills to support the community's diversity and economic development of women in business."



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PR firms can provide edge to small businesses

By Deborah Roush
Contributing writer

When Colours Inc. was a fledgling business with just a few employees, the owner of the interior design company, with \$110 in her business account and one contract, knew she would hire a public relations firm as quickly as possible to help build her business.

Now, more than 15 years later, Colours President Leslie Parraguirre is still a believer that her public relations firm — impress communications — is one of the reasons her company has 10 employees working on 30 to 50 projects throughout the country on a regular basis.

"I had worked with a large national design firm ... and understood the necessity for marketing," Parraguirre said.

However, she struggled to find the right fit with a public relations firm that could meet the specialized needs of a small business.

The initial firms she hired were costly — one created a glossy, expensive brochure that wasn't helpful. Another developed a Web site, but "disappeared and didn't finish the job," Parraguirre said.

Now, Colours pays impress, a 7-year-old, Las Vegas public relations firm with six full-time employees, a monthly retainer to generate story ideas, write press releases and promote her company to the local, regional and national media.

And the results are paying off.

Recently, impress pitched a story to a local luxury magazine and Colours wound up on the cover, with Parraguirre discussing designing for high-rise condominiums in Las Vegas.

"Impress pitches us constantly and they do it so well and have all the right contacts. They stay on top of what is hot and what is not. If you are pitching the same old thing every day, it simply won't get picked up," she said.

"And they do every kind of press release known — if we hire someone, if we promote someone. They (get the word out) on our pro-bono work. Plus, they generate a lot of human interest story ideas," she added.

"It is key to look for a firm that is extremely enthusiastic and very well read in who's who in the contact world of PR.

"Ask what they can do for you and how they are going to make it happen. If they're not conducting bi-weekly meetings with you, they're not doing their job," she said.

Most important, Parraguirre said, get references of businesses equal to the size of your business. "If they are not working with a small business, they won't understand the start-up process," she warned.

Sheree Jensen, a managing partner of Eclipse—A Marketing Firm, said small business owners like Parraguirre, who hire a public relations firm out of the starting blocks, are wise.

"The best time to call is when you decide to start the company — once you know what niche you want to fulfill," Jensen said.

"It's important to discuss strategies with several different people — the city or county for business licenses, a lawyer for paperwork, etc. As an owner is getting those types of things in order, they should also contact a firm to discuss (public relations needs.)

"So many people think that they will open their doors and everybody will come. It just doesn't happen that way," she said.

"A public relations firm can discuss what type of 'look' a company wants to establish. We ask things like are they a new technical company that has a racy feel or are they more conservative? Who are they selling their products or services to?

"If your target audience is somebody 15 to 25 you want a different look and feel than if it's 35-plus," Jensen said.

Next, a public relations firm can help develop a logo, signage, business cards and stationery. "And if we're involved early enough we can even help create the company name," she added.

A tag line, too, can be important to marketing a small business, Jensen said.

"That's something like GE ('We bring good things to life') or 7-Up ('Never had it, never will'). Our company's tagline is Eclipse—A Marketing Firm: Outshine, Overshadow, Offset," she said.

Impress communications' Ann Marie Kluza, vice president and partner, said a well designed, easy-to-read website is another tool every small business should use to promote itself.

"A Web site today is definitely needed. People will look online for much of what they used to look at a brochure for," she said. "It can save on printing costs."

"Either way, your ad agency or PR or marketing firm should be an extension of your team. And if they're separate entities, they should work together to figure out the best approach," Jensen said.

Kluza said it's imperative to hire a public relations firm with "people you can work with.

"If you don't like them as a person, it's not going to work out — even if they are the biggest and best in town," she said.

"Smaller businesses should look to smaller PR firms that know where they are coming from. And there's a big difference in price range," she said.



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SUCCESS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2A

example? Out the window.

“(My former partner) probably still owes me the good majority of it, but I’ve kind of written it off,” Fine said. “Luckily, I had cash flow coming in from a real estate deal I had done in college at the exact time I needed it so luck has played a big hand in this business.”

Luck, not to mention commitment and perseverance.

“We worked so hard the first year,” he said. “I was climbing through ceilings and had fiber glass on my arms from doing installations, and I felt like I did \$100 million in sales. But we only did \$158,000 in 2003.”

Advice from a family friend may have helped fuel the fire for Sting’s future .

“Perry Rogers, who runs Agassi Enterprises, came into my office one day and sat down and said ‘It’s so easy to do business and make money in this town. All you have to do is call people back and listen to what they say.’ So I answered the phone when people called, listened to them, and the business just kind of blossomed out.”

Indeed. In 2004, Sting Surveillance brought in \$2.5 million in sales, a figure Fine anticipates may reach more than \$10 million for 2005.

Besides a commitment to customer service, Fine credits his success to his talented workforce, which has grown to 15 employees.

“I have an amazing staff,” he said. “I know one thing: No matter what I’m trying to do, there’s someone out there who knows more about it than I do, and I try and surround myself with those people.”

As for the future of the company, which has also developed software for a credit card verification system that Fine said can save clients \$1 million or more annually in credit card fraud:

“It’s so hard to tell,” he said. “There are so many different ways I want to take this business. I’ve had offers from different companies that want to invest money and take the company public, but I don’t know if I want to give up control, even though it will allow me to copy what I’ve done in Vegas all over the country, which is kind of exciting.”

Paragon Pools

When Joe Vassallo launched Paragon Pools in 2001, he had a distinct advantage over other entrepreneurs in his industry: more than one dozen years of local experience from which to draw.

Vassallo, who previously studied architecture and also spent several years in the orange juice wholesaling business in New York City, moved to Las Vegas in the late 1980s. While he was in the process of purchasing a home — and, of course, a swimming pool — he made myriad astute recommendations to the designer.



Vassallo

Tango Pools, working his way up to director of sales and marketing until the company was sold in 1998. From there, he assumed the position of general manager at Paddock Pools’ Las Vegas division before launching Paragon.

“My experience may be a little more unique than the normal person who just comes in and starts a pool company,” he said. “I had been in the business for 12 or 13 years so I had already had a good working relationship with just about everybody I needed to know in the industry. Even getting started knowing the procedures, getting the license and knowing which subcontractors to go to — I had a really good basis from which to start also and had good contacts in the industry. I also had an idea of where my customer base was and how to get to them — we started with the homebuilding industry, and I had a lot of contacts with homebuilders who had confidence in me. That’s not something you can get by opening up a book or going to school.”

Vassallo’s extensive experience — coupled with a solid business plan — played out. Launched with an initial investment of \$50,000 in personal funds, Paragon grossed more than \$1 million in sales in 2002, a figure which topped \$5 million last year. In 2004, he said the company, which has nine employees, dug 140 to 150 pools, with the average contract running about \$45,000.

“We’re still growing, but this year I think we’ve had some unusual weather,” he said, adding that the economic climate may also mildly affect the business. “We’re still busy, but this year (we’ll likely gross) about the same as last year or maybe show a moderate increase. We don’t perceive it doubling like in the past.”

Nonetheless, in a city where swimming pools are almost as common as two-car garages, Paragon — which means a model of excellence or perfection, by definition, according to Vassallo— is firmly entrenched in the industry. Although Vassallo credits the company’s success largely to his previous local work in the field, he offered advice to new start-ups that may not have the wisdom of his experience:

“Do your due diligence and really talk to a lot of people who have been successful in the industry,” he said. “Attend seminars, because you can really find a wealth of information, and make sure you do have a good business plan.”



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Proper financing key tool for small businesses

By **Damon Hodge**
Staff writer

While poor management is the Number 1 killer of small companies, industry experts say countless businesses have been deep-sixed by inadequate or ill-timed financing.

As acting chief of finance for the Nevada District office of the U.S. Small Business Administration, Ed Brown sees the latter scenario often: entrepreneurs open a business without enough cash to run it, forcing them to scramble for financing, the search often ending in more debt and, eventually, dissolution of the company.

Personal affairs

Part of that homework includes first cleaning up your finances, something Brown says too many prospective business owners overlook.

"A bank and the SBA can only judge you personally because your business doesn't exist, thus they look at credit reports and criminal history, looking for character issues," Brown said.

As such, it helps to think of your credit history as a resume — your life reduced to numbers. As a potential employer, banks will examine your work history, looking for key pieces of data that will shape their perceptions. They'll vet your credit report for warning signs such as bankruptcies or a criminal record.

"A lot depends on the reasons you have these things. Did you declare bankruptcy to escape credit card debt? Or was it the result of significant medical issues?" said Brown, adding that only recent parolees are precluded from receiving a small business loan. "If you did something as a 21-year-old and you're 40, it probably won't be used against you. But if you did something recent, such as spousal abuse, you can be turned down."

Janis Stevenson, business development advisor for the government-funded Nevada Small Business Development Center, which offers expertise in starting, developing and growing a business, advises entrepreneurs to caucus with family members about the risks they're taking.

"Lending institutions don't finance the largest share of monies for small businesses," Stevenson said. "Most people start out getting financing from friends, families and their own savings."

Follow the plan

If your credit history is the resume, then your business plan is the dossier — as complete a picture as can be painted of your financial life.

Besides credit history, a good business plan would contain two years of financials (detailed breakdowns of

expenses, revenues and ancillary costs for your business), two years of financial projections (how will the business make money, how much and how it will be used), two to three years of personal tax returns — remember, you have the history, the business doesn't — and any information that make the plan more attractive.

The capital question

How much money do you need? It's a beguiling question whose answer can depend on responding to a slew of other queries: How much is the business projected to make in the first few years?

What economic factors can affect your industry? How urgent is the need for capital? Are you relying on the business to take care of business as well as personal expenses?

People have a tendency to high-ball the numbers, thinking that money will flow in from day one and they'll be able to pay back the loan in no time. "Give me \$100,000 and I'll pay you back in two years," they'll say. Two years later, the business has closed its doors. Research shows that most businesses reach solvency in three to five years, sometimes more. If the loan note lasts seven years,

Brown advises sticking to it.

Show me the money

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