

Rivals join forces for a peak return

BUSINESSSES are built on competition.

To do well, operators are expected to beat competitors and protect their intellectual property with trademarks and patents. To ensure success they believe they have to be secretive and not share their knowledge.

However, in the micro business sector things are changing.

Successful businesses are now sharing not only knowledge, but resources. Much of their business is built on a mutual trust and a gut feeling about the people with whom to develop an alliance.

Examples of this mutually beneficial co-operation are three screen printers, who have boosted their businesses by supporting each other.

During the recent gas crisis Terry Rogers,



MICRO BUSINESS
BARBARA GABOGRECAN

from Crazy Shirts, could not complete his orders because he could not use his gas dryer. He approached John Allock, from Landring Gear, who was able to keep Mr Rogers going with his electric dryer.

"It is important for micro businesses to support each other," Mr Allock said.

"I also network with Tony Hardman, from All Pro, as he has expertise in areas of printing that I do not have. By sharing technology we learn from each other."

The three share knowledge relating to raw materials and specific procedures, but most importantly they give each other work.

Micro businesses often experience peaks when the workload becomes overpowering and it is essential to have another operator who can take some of the burden.

"Customer service is the most important aspect of our business... we must ensure that the job is always completed on time," Mr Allock said.

"We simply give part of our workload to each other, and the customer ends up delighted by the speedy service."

Learning on the job

Putting an idea

into practice is a

real education.

JULIE HOSKING

reports

getting it made overseas or it would never get on the shelf."

Mr D'Elia took his advice and faxed his design to a supplier in Taiwan.

"I couldn't believe the price they quoted, it was about four times cheaper," he said. "My concern then was what kind of quality it would be."

But when he received a few samples back in plastic-coated, chrome-plated and stainless steel varieties, he was pleasantly surprised.

"They had actually done some things extra to make it better, such as sanding an edge which would have cost too much here," he said.

The hanger, which retails for \$7.95, has still been an expensive business — about \$10,000 — and has taken more than a year to develop.

Mr D'Elia had some orders from a trade show in Sydney, but it has been a battle to find an outlet. Kmart has ordered some, but he does not expect the hanger to make him rich.

"It just doesn't work like that. When you see someone on a show who has made something and he's a millionaire, you know that the person just didn't get there so easily," he said.

"It has probably taken years to get it right and for every product there are millions that don't make it.

"I'm lucky I've had the time and freedom to work on it myself, otherwise it would have cost me twice as much."

But he has no regrets. "The money I have invested here has been like a course at a university, only better. I have learnt so much and I am proud that I did it."



Clean idea: Steven D'Elia's Hygiene Hanger. Picture: ROB LEESON

Inventor still unflappable

From previous page

Mr Bellette said the cost of production in Australia had forced him to look overseas for a manufacturer.

"No one was doing the plastic moulding I needed for the Sandlok, but I could never have afforded to have it made here. The cost just isn't realistic for small-time people like me," Mr Bellette said.

An adviser at Small Business Victoria helped him come up with a list of about 10 umbrella manufacturers in Asia. One of

them agreed to produce the safety point on an umbrella and pass on a share of the sales to Mr Bellette.

The cheques are not likely to see him put up his feet any time soon, but when he thinks he is running out of steam, a bit of good news spurs him.

In September he was told Amway would put Sandlok in 300,000 catalogues next year. "If it goes well, it could lead to

being put in the American catalogue, which has a much bigger market," Mr Bellette said.

And avenues may open in Europe as a result of Sandlok enjoying exposure at a trade show there.

East London University is also conducting wind tunnel tests using the Sandlok clip-on umbrellas. The safety point has undergone comprehensive tests at Moshash University.

Mr Bellette is also working on other projects. Like his invention, he is not easily swayed.

Monitor the risks



COMPUTERS AT WORK
HELEN BRADLEY

USING a computer can be a health hazard, especially if it is installed without consideration of the operator's comfort.

The ultimate cost of a poor working environment is not only in quantifiable areas — higher absenteeism, accident rates and WorkCover claims — but also in less tangible areas.

If operators are physically uncomfortable they will be less motivated and have less job satisfaction.

The first step to understanding and minimising the problems is to acknowledge that a good working environment is crucial to an employee's well-being and health.

The second step is to identify the key causes of work-station discomfort.

Apart from repeated motions, such as using a keyboard or calculator, other causes being in an awkward position to complete a task, or maintaining a position for long periods.

- In order to prevent employee fatigue and injury, follow these basic principles:
 - Provide fully adjustable chairs, footrests and padded rests to ease pressure on limbs;
 - Encourage frequent rest breaks for body and eyes;
 - Train employees to stretch regularly and exercise tired muscles;
 - Provide anti-glare filters for monitors;
 - Encourage employees to take regular eye tests;
 - Install blinds so external light can be adjusted to reduce glares;
 - Ensure that desks are large enough for a monitor to sit arm's length from the operator;
 - Install split level desks so keyboard height can be adjusted;
 - Arrange desks so that most frequently used items are closest to the operator.

An ergonomic consultant can help manage and prevent injuries in the office by evaluating work stations and suggesting changes. A WorkCover insurer or an industry association will recommend a consultant.

An investment in properly designed work stations and better work practices will pay for itself by increasing productivity and reducing absenteeism and employee turnover.

Wrong cinemas

An article about the company Big Fish in the October edition of *Your Business* incorrectly referred to sculptures commissioned for cinemas at Crown Casino and Sunshine as being Hoyt's cinemas.

The works were actually commissioned by Village cinemas, not Hoyt's.



Mr Bellette: Fresh hopes.