Small Business Guide

A Guide To Help You Start, Build And Grow Your Small Business

Essential Steps
Initiating a process improvement program

Be Resourceful
No money is no excuse

Success Stories from Entrepreneurs

Looking at Importing?
More to consider than just price

Georgia’s 2015 Small Business Person of the Year

Former pro golfer Scott Soesbee, founder of FlameOFF Coatings, finds road to success can be rough, but rewarding.
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Scott Soesbee of FlameOFF Coatings, Inc.

“By Bobby Nesbitt

Scott Soesbee was enjoying the sweet life as a golf pro at a swanky North Carolina country club when he began to get the entrepreneurial itch. He wanted to be his own boss, start his own business, but he wasn’t sure what type of business. So, as he talked golf with club members, he also began to talk business, getting ideas … and he got a good one.

“There was this one guy who obviously had a ton of money,” Soesbee says. “He was real nice to me so I finally asked him what kind of business he thought I should start. Turns out he had developed a fire pump system that would pump water into high-rises and sold his company for millions. He told me if I wanted to make money I should start a business dealing with fire safety.”

That advice started Soesbee on a journey that led to him founding FlameOFF Coatings, Inc. in 2004, a company so successful he has now been named Georgia’s Small Business Person of the Year for 2015. The company, of course, does deal with fire safety, specifically fire retardant products that can provide up to two hours fire protection.

Soesbee’s journey to success was not always an easy one and it required a long learning experience, he says.

“When I first started looking at what kind of business to start, I talked to some contractors I knew and they told me about the problems they had with buildings that needed upgrading to meet new fire safety codes, an often costly, time-consuming job that usually
required replacing walls and ceilings,” Soesbee says. “I saw a niche for a business if I could deliver a product that would make the process as easy as painting an apartment.”

There were some fire retardant products on the market, but “I knew I wanted to start my own business and would need to develop my own product,” he says.

Soesbee says he knew he needed to learn all he could about fire safety, so he met with experts in the field, took classes and worked as a distributor for another company with similar products. He moved to the Atlanta area in 2003, using his college training in IT to pay the bills until he could get his business going.

“It took a couple of years to develop my own product,” he says. “It takes a lot of research and development to get off the ground and keep improving the product. We’re still fire testing all the time to be sure our products meet the required codes.”

The FlameOFF Coatings headquarters and testing lab are located just west of Atlanta, in Douglasville, convenient to reaching customers throughout the world. The company sells fire resistant coatings (used for walls and other areas) and fire retardant sprays, used for fabrics, such as curtains and drapes. Soesbee says the fire resistant (or intumescent) coatings are code compliant for fire endurance ratings that require up to 2-hour fire protection and can be used on a variety of surfaces, including sheetrock, wood, concrete and sheet metal.

“Our biggest customers include the military and those in healthcare, along with general contractors and building owners,” Soesbee says.

“We have made money every year; at a minimum 100 percent more than the year before,” Soesbee says. He knows that level of success won’t last forever as the numbers get higher and higher, but “we’re always looking at getting better. That’s why we do so much testing. Once you get your formula you’re always trying to make it better.”

For others interested in starting their own business, Soesbee says, “You’ve got to learn as much as you can about your business but don’t try to do things you are not qualified to do. For me, that’s things like taxes.”

He recommends finding professional help for those areas you don’t know how to do and seeking out good advice to help you do things better. He has high praise for two organizations that helped him: the Georgia Fire Marshal’s Office and the University of Georgia Small Business Development Center at the University of West Georgia.

“The fire marshal’s office in Georgia is the best,” Soesbee says. “The people there are great and I learned what I needed to know taking classes and talking to people there.”

As his business grew, Soesbee realized he needed to know more. “Things were progressing well but I saw I needed to learn more about running a business,” he says. “I saw information on the Small Business Development Center, visited the SBDC office at the University of West Georgia and met with Todd Anduze.”

Anduze, who is an SBDC area director based in the University of West Georgia office, says, “Scott is a great client. He is a very driven individual but he knows his limitations and knows when to ask for help. I find many starting up their own small businesses get so involved in running the business they wait too long to seek help.”

“We’ve worked with Scott on many aspects of his business, everything from redesigning his website to accounting, personnel and market expansion,” Anduze says. “We’re working with him now on the possibility of expanding to serve the residential market and to markets in other countries. Scott has a product that can compete globally but every country has different code standards so there will be a lot of testing involved to meet those standards.”

While the product is now used primarily in commercial or public buildings, Anduze says Soesbee is also looking at general residential applications. “When I think of the product, I think of protecting families,” Anduze says. “If Scott can get the cost down it would be marketable for general residential construction.”

“It amazes me how much help the SBDC office has been. They are great,” says Soesbee, who talks and meets with Anduze on a regular basis. Soesbee has also continued his business education, receiving his MBA earlier this year through the Georgia WebMBA program, which offers qualified professionals the opportunity to earn an accredited, accelerated online MBA degree without interrupting their work lives. The program is offered through six universities, including the University of West Georgia.

For other aspiring entrepreneurs, Soesbee warns there will be tough days trying to get a new business up and going. “I knew what I had to do but there were times when I asked myself ‘what am I doing?’” he says. “I can tell you, working as a golf pro at a country club was easy, but starting your own business can be really hard work. But you have to keep in mind that all the bad stuff is really a learning experience. You have to have problems to really learn.”

As Georgia’s 2015 Small Business Person of the Year, Soesbee, along with winners from the other states, will be honored by the U.S. Small Business Administration during National Small Business Week, May 4-8, at an awards celebration in Washington, D.C.