A Business Tail: Veterinarian Foams at Mouth, Chases Tail, Learns New Tricks—A Case Study

By Caroline Jordan, MBA

Many self employed professionals find themselves overwhelmed, frustrated, and confused when it comes to running their businesses. The deep skills they have in their professional field do little to prepare them for the dog-eat-dog world of running a business. The following is a case study from the client files of small business expert, Caroline Jordan, detailing a typical professional's experience trying to run a business without foaming at the mouth.

The Best Doggone Veterinarian in Town

One of my clients, I'll call him John, is everything you could ever wish for in a veterinarian. He's kind, concerned, competent, and willing to call in a specialist for cases he doesn't feel comfortable handling. His office is busy, his staff pleasant, and service is good. But John has a problem. He's exhausted. From the time he started his practice twelve years ago, he's been doing all the accounting, tax preparing, human resources, dealing with insurance companies, banks, labor surveys, building maintenance, and calls from sales people while trying to work full time as a veterinarian. As such, his accounting is a mess, his tax returns haven't been filed for five years, and office policies and procedures allow unproductive employees to continue receiving a paycheck.

The Hair Loss Isn't Mange—It's Stress!

Meanwhile, John is pulling his hair out all day long. He's starting to look like a dog with mange. His staff is continually asking him routine questions, he's taking one unnecessary phone call after another, and chaos hangs like a storm cloud over his head everyday. John hires an accountant to straighten out years' worth of problems with his books but still keeps his hands in the process. He has the accountant take care of his books but still insists on being the one to cut the checks and sometimes he enters credit card charges and sometimes he doesn't. The accountant spends hours each month trying to figure out what John has done and fix his errors. He shies away from having a CPA handle his tax problem because he is determined to fix the problem on his own. Because he's already overwhelmed with his practice, the tax problem doesn't get fixed. Even worse, John drags the problem around with him everyday; feeling the pressure, the stress, knowing that with every tick of the clock the problem is getting worse.

John decides to rent a second office so he can get away from his office to get his taxes done. And still John is exhausted and overwhelmed. His tax problem continues to drag on. The problems in his office still all land on his desk. And he continues to handle them feeling stressed, frustrated, and helpless.

Chasing Your Own Tail?

Are John's problems unusual? Are his actions that of a business owner whose mind has finally become unhinged? Not at all. John is making the mistake that many small

business owners make. Instead of focusing on what he does best and improving on those skills that he has a strong aptitude for, John wants to do it all.

If he worked and studied for years, he would at the very best be a poor accountant. He just doesn't have the aptitude for it. He can continue to spend money on subscriptions to newsletters on how to get organized and he can continue to purchase organizing tools, bins, baskets, and totes (most of them still empty) but he will never be organized because he does not have an aptitude for organizing.

A Prescription for Dr. John

So what can we do for poor John? We can't leave him hanging in the storm, tempest tossed and headed for the rocks.

Here are my recommendations:

1. Take all the tax mess, put it in one of the empty organizing totes, drive to the CPA's office, say "Call me if you have any questions." Go fishing.

2. Tell the accountant handling the day to day books that she's in charge of making sure things get done right. Keep your hands out of it. Request the data that you need to run your business—sales numbers and trends, monthly financials, delinquent customer accounts, a regular report of bills that need to be paid, etc. Go sailing.

3. Tell the office manager that she needs to come up with an operations manual of how routine things in the office and clinic need to be done. Give her a deadline and the time to do that by having her assign some of her routine tasks to staff members. Take your wife out to dinner.

4. Hire an outside consultant to clean up the back office clutter—not a friend or family member, someone who is able to deal with the emotions of a clutterbug without backing down or getting discouraged. Learn the new system and follow it. This will involve discipline and teaching an old dog new tricks.

5. Assign a staff member to maintain the new system, someone who isn't afraid to ride herd on you and the paper. Have them train with the consultant so they know how to keep it up.

6. Keep track of all questions you are asked during the day. Create a Frequently Asked Questions list and give it to the office manager for inclusion in the operations manual.

7. Limit the times of day when you can be disturbed—this includes phone calls, questions, email, sales people, etc. Define what constitutes an emergency or a critical situation and instruct your staff (or yourself if you work alone) to use their judgment before disturbing you.

Just these few actions will save John between 20-30 hours EACH WEEK!

Avoiding Separation Anxiety

When a business owner is faced with the concept of saving a chunk of time every week, the first response is “What will I do with all that time?” It’s a very uncomfortable feeling. “Does that mean I’m not necessary any more? I won’t be as important as I was when I had to do everything.” They immediately start trying to fill that vacuum with the tasks that used to fill that time and before you know it they’re right back where they started—overwhelmed, confused, and frustrated. But added to that is a sense of failure because they had it in their grasp and lost it.

New Tricks for an Old Dog

So what can John do with his new found time?

1. Use the time to think and plan for the future. Where do you want your business to be in one year and five years? How will you get there? Remember, as a business owner your real job is to steer the ship and chart the course. Swabbing the deck and repairing the nets is a job others can do.

2. Build his reputation by writing articles for professional journals or speaking to associations.

3. Build his business by writing tip sheets or articles for his customers or speaking at local organizations or visiting schools with his favorite dog to teach children the proper care of pets.

4. Spend more time providing veterinarian care to raise his revenues.

5. Work 60 hours instead of 80.

6. Catch up on that stack of professional journals.

7. Attend a seminar on marketing or a new veterinary technique or Spanish dancing.

8. Take that vacation his wife has been bugging him about for years.

9. Spend more time with his kids and grandkids.

10. Go fishing. Or sailing. Or golfing. Or lie in a hammock with a good book. Life doesn’t have to be so hard.

11. Drive down the road with his head out the window.

One of the toughest transitions a business owner has to make is moving from being a technician (a deck swabber) to being The Captain, the one who steers the ship and charts the course. And for business owners who operate alone this switch is even more difficult when there doesn’t seem to be anyone to delegate to. But by doing those things that you have an aptitude for and hiring out the other tasks, your business moves ahead much more quickly. There are consultants and coaches available to handle every aspect of your business from planning to operations to finances to marketing. Find results oriented people you can trust who complement your strengths and help you move your business forward. The alternative is living

with the stress, frustration, and confusion that come from trying to play all the roles in your business.

Caroline Jordan, MBA, is a veteran small business owner, accountant, consultant, trainer, and author. She is the owner of The Jordan Result, a company specializing in developing real world, practical resources to help small business owners improve cash flow and business operations. Jordan is also an accounting and business professor and the author of "Stop the Cash Flow Roller Coaster, I Want to Get Off!" For more tips and strategies to build your business visit www.TheJordanResult.com.