

Business network provides advice, motivation, financial help

BY KRISTEN FIDH

Local entrepreneurs say they depend on a network of business-minded associates for advice and motivation and, in some cases, financial assistance.

"I believe it's more important to build connections than to secure clients," said Bryan Durocher of Durocher Enterprises, a business-consulting company that provides coaching and public-relations services.

In his fifth year of business, Mr. Durocher said he keeps a tight circle of professionals near him. His lawyer, accountant, graphics and Web designers, printer, insurance agent and the network surrounding the Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce provide a sounding board for his own ideas and a pool of those from others.

His newest enterprise is a series of compact discs offering business guidance and motivational speeches that mirror his coaching philosophy. Some of the tips originated from listening to other consultants and evaluating what made them successful.

"I am a big believer in that if you do what successful people have done in the past, you'll be successful, too," Mr. Durocher said. "You have to see what has already been done and then listen to your clients to see how you can improve on that."

Rosiland Merritt, who has owned her interior-design company for more than 30 years, developed her newest enterprise, Homes in Transition, after noticing that her clients' needs were shifting. As many began moving into assisted-living facilities, she said, they needed help with a



Photo by Martine Quaresi

Edgar Leal got help from 12 investors to open Gables restaurant.

move and making repairs on their homes to prepare them for sale.

"I have become close with my clients over the years, and I still want to serve them," Ms. Merritt said. "I feel like I am giving back to the community with Homes in Transition."

Ms. Merritt and Mr. Durocher said they began their enterprises without consulting a bank or investors for financial assistance. But many successful entrepre-

neurs lack startup capital when they begin.

Edgar Leal, owner and chef at Cacao in Coral Gables, an upscale Latin-American restaurant, finances his business through 12 investors.

When Cacao was still a brainchild, Mr. Leal consulted owners in the restaurant business who had previously asked him to cook or speak at conferences. He said that between his man-

agement philosophy and culinary vision, initial contacts were interested in investing.

"I secured the first four pretty easily," Mr. Leal said. "Then they called their friends, and everything came together."

While the restaurant has been open less than a year, Mr. Leal created the business plan two years ago with the philosophy that every employee can generate ideas that make the business better.

"No one way is the right way to do it," he said. "I have a friend who was successful in managing the Texaco oil company for years, so it's good to talk to someone successful who is interested in my restaurant. We rewrite my business plan together every three months."

Because he has a strong network of support with his friends and investors, Mr. Leal said, he never considered asking banks for a loan.

John Bull, owner of advertising and marketing firm Thought Loft, said that although he was fortunate to have enough startup capital after years of working for agencies, he would have turned to friends before turning to a bank.

"Banks are about the bottom line—money," Mr. Bull said. "I don't know if a bank can see your vision or wants to. But the people close to you know that you are passionate and can make it work, even if you don't have a great track record."

Mr. Durocher, who coaches a number of other entrepreneurs, said not every business owner can or wishes to ask investors for financing. Many do turn to banks and value professional re-

sources.

Tamara Aruj, a Miami entrepreneur in the beauty and salon industry, said she appreciates the relationship she has developed with Coconut Grove Bank.

"They know who I am, they know I have accounts there, and I trust them," Ms. Aruj said. "It's ultimately about the numbers of dollars a business rakes in, and I feel that a bank is the most straightforward institution out there concerning profits."

Former owner of Aruj Salon and Spa in Coconut Grove, Ms. Aruj is establishing a new venture, BrandNew, through which she distributes a home skin-care system to salons and spas through Florida.

Ms. Aruj also is developing a Web site, www.brandnewyou.com, where customers can purchase products she will endorse. The site will present her life, health and beauty interests and serve as a forum for women to share thoughts and advice.

"I want it to be a place where women can come and share useful information," Ms. Aruj said. "Sales will just be a byproduct."

Previously a sales educator for Aveda products, Ms. Aruj said she relies on her circle of friends in the industry to bounce ideas off—especially when a particular part of her business plan has gone awry. She also consults Mr. Durocher as a coach.

"A lot of times, you feel isolated and alone as a business owner," Mr. Durocher said. "That is why you need a network, people who care about your success and can bring fresh perspectives to your pool of ideas."