An illustration of three business professionals standing on stylized buildings. The person on the left is wearing teal trousers and brown shoes. The person in the middle is wearing a pink dress and purple high-heeled shoes. The person on the right is wearing a green suit and brown shoes. The buildings are grey with yellow windows. The background is a blue gradient with a subtle pattern.

ATB Business™

ALBERTA  
VENTURE



# THE SMALL BUSINESS SUPERSTARS


20

## SMALL BUSINESSES THAT STAND OUT



### EXPERT ADVICE

ON HOW TO GROW YOUR SALES, **HIRE THE RIGHT PEOPLE,**  
**MANAGE YOUR MONEY** AND COME UP WITH THE NEXT GREAT IDEA



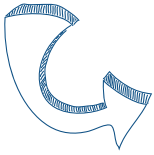
**PHILOSOPHY #7**  
**STAND BY BUSINESS**  
**THROUGH UPS AND DOWNS.**

**Sometimes running a business in Alberta is like riding an emotional rollercoaster:**

To be successful and grow, you need to ride out the booms and busts. And to do that, you need strong business partners who understand what it takes to be successful in this province. ATB Financial has stood by Alberta businesses for almost 75 years, helping people ride out the good times and bad. Supporting Alberta businesses—now that's our kind of thrill ride. [atb.com/business](https://atb.com/business)

Vote online at [albertaventure.com/superstars](http://albertaventure.com/superstars)

# THE SMALL BUSINESS SUPERSTARS



EDITOR  
MAX FAWCETT  
CONTRIBUTORS  
GEOFFREY MORGAN  
AND ALIX KEMP  
ART DIRECTOR  
LINDSAY MACLACHLAN

**READY  
TO VOTE?**  
Scan this  
QR code  
and have  
your say



## 4 INTRODUCTION

## 5 HOW TO VOTE

## 6 SALES AND MARKETING SUPERSTARS

The art of the sell is essential for small businesses. These four companies have just about perfected it

## 10 THE SECRET TO SUCCESS: SALES AND MARKETING

## 12 STRATEGY AND INNOVATION SUPERSTARS

Companies that don't innovate don't survive. Meet four companies that will live long and prosper

## 16 THE SECRET TO SUCCESS: STRATEGY AND INNOVATION

## 18 HR SUPERSTARS

Finding the right people is a challenge for every small business. Meet four companies that have risen to it

## 22 THE SECRET TO SUCCESS: HR

## 24 CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE SUPERSTARS

Every business says it cares about its customers. These four show it every day

## 28 THE SECRET TO SUCCESS: CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

## 30 OVERALL SUPERSTARS

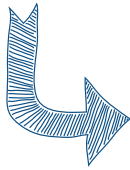
Four companies that do it all – and do all of it well

## 34 THE SECRET TO SUCCESS: FINANCING

## INTRODUCTION



# STARTING SMALL



**WHAT DO APPLE, IBM, LULULEMON, SHAW** Communications, CIBC and Suncor all have in common? Aside from success and global influence, they were all, at various points in the past, small businesses. Wellington Holbrook, an executive vice-president at ATB Financial, has spent the majority of his career in banking working with small businesses, and while most of them don't end up as multi-billion dollar companies he says they all share the same spirit of risk-taking and entrepreneurship. "It's about their belief that they can be successful, and they can make it work," he says. "It's pretty awesome, actually."



### SERGE SAYS

*We've recruited **Serge Martin**, a Grande Prairie-based director of business development and former branch manager with ATB Financial, and asked him to share some of the experience he's built up over years of dealing with small businesses in his community. You'll find his insights throughout this guide.*

Holbrook thinks that spirit is strongest in Alberta, where small businesses account for 96 per cent of all businesses in the province. "When you look at the rate of small business creation, there isn't a province in the country that's better than Alberta," he says. "I've lived in Vancouver and worked in Toronto, but there's something special about Alberta entrepreneurs."

He got into the business of banking in large part because his mother was an entrepreneur who ran a small business. "I grew up as a kid seeing the stresses she had," he says, "and when the banker came to visit it was usually a pretty bad day in our house. When I was growing up and thinking about the kinds of things I wanted to do,

Vote online at [albertaventure.com/superstars](http://albertaventure.com/superstars)

it's funny but I wanted to be a banker. I thought, 'I can make a difference for people like my mom.'

After almost 20 years of making those differences, he's learned a few things about small business. First, he says, people should never underestimate their own ability to build one of their own. "Just because they've never done it doesn't mean they can't do it," he says. "You'd be amazed how many entrepreneurs have been successful, and built some of Canada's largest businesses, because they just had the guts to try."

Second, he says small business owners shouldn't be afraid to ask for help or look for support, whether it's from their banker or their best friend. "Being an entrepreneur and deciding to take the risks associated with starting a business or buying a business can feel like a pretty lonely exercise. But usually, the support networks around us are better than we think."

But above all, Holbrook says, he's learned to respect and admire the people who choose to meet the challenges associated with running a small business. "Most Canadians don't necessarily appreciate the magnitude of the risks that small business owners take to build their businesses," he says. "Those are risks that most Canadians wouldn't take, because we're more comfortable knowing that we'll get a paycheque every two weeks. Small-business people don't usually have that luxury, and I think sometimes we should tip our hat to the people that have decided to give it a shot."

With that in mind, meet Alberta's Small Business Superstars. Get ready to tip your hat.



## CAST YOUR VOTE

### ★ IT'S SIMPLE –

Have your say on who's Alberta's Top Small Business Superstar. Make your choice online at [albertaventure.com/superstars](http://albertaventure.com/superstars) and you could win exclusive prizes from *Alberta Venture*. The Top Superstars will be featured online throughout the year. Vote from October 1st to November 30th and check back after to see who won!



## THE NOMINEES



LOCATION **EDMONTON** OWNER **LINDA HA**  
EMPLOYEES **4** FOUNDED **2011**

# BARBER HA

### ★ THE BUSINESS

Like most of the newer barber shops that are suddenly in vogue these days, Edmonton's Barber Ha offers its mostly-male clientele a great haircut at a reasonable price along with guy-oriented goodies like straight-razor shaves. What sets it apart from the crowd, though, is that it's more than just a place to get a hair cut. It's also a social club, a place where men can go to air their grievances, ask for advice on their love life and get tips on what to wear and where to eat. "It's like *Cheers*," says owner Linda Ha, "only with haircuts." It helps that she plays the role of Sam Malone to perfection, serving as part stylist, part social convener, part therapist, part mediator and even, on occasion, part bartender – they have a relationship with the makers of Pabst Blue Ribbon.



### ★ THE CASE

Barber Ha's best marketing tool is the real estate on the top of its clients' heads, and the business has benefited from a strong word-of-mouth campaign. But Linda Ha and her team knew they would need more than that if they were to attract a strong base of clients. So they created a minimalist black-and-white annual calendar that is distributed, free of charge, featuring styling tips along with photos of some of her more camera-friendly customers. There's the website that offers everything from manly advice from a military veteran to restaurant reviews and fashion advice. And then there's the so-called "Legion" membership, which gives value-conscious men the ability to buy a year's worth of haircuts for a fixed up-front price. "I wasn't sure how people were going to take it," she says, "but we sold 40 in the first month." Ha's legion is up to almost 300 members now, and it has her looking to expand to a new and more central location.



### THE TAKEAWAY

Strategic marketing tactics should align with your company's brand profile.

Vote online at [albertaventure.com/superstars](http://albertaventure.com/superstars)LOCATION **COCHRANE** OWNERS **MARK AND MEGHAN TAYFEL**  
EMPLOYEES **30** FOUNDED **1948**

# MACKAY'S ICE CREAM



## ★ THE BUSINESS

MacKay's Ice Cream has been a popular stop for tourists and locals alike since 1948, and it's no wonder. While the times have changed, the ice cream that MacKay's serves up hasn't. Mark and Meghan Tayfel (who is the granddaughter of the company's founders) took over the business a few years ago, and while they've added a few new flavours and built a new website, they haven't changed much when it comes to what they're selling. "We're still sticking with the same original recipes," Mark Tayfel says. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." *Avenue Calgary* magazine certainly agrees – it ranked the Cochrane store as one of the city's best places to get ice cream. Obviously, it's worth the approximately 30-minute drive.



## SERGE SAYS

*"Clients are usually surprised when I tell them about options outside of ATB. Of course, I want to do every deal I can, but that's not always realistic, so I deal with a number of outside groups that can fill in the holes in areas where I can't."*

## ★ THE CASE

If you're in the dessert business these days, you're probably trying to find a way to help your customers balance flavour with fitness. Not MacKay's Ice Cream, though. In addition to sticking with their traditional flavours, they've also preserved the way those flavours are made. While most ice cream is made with around 10 per cent butterfat (less than that and it's technically ice milk), MacKay's ice cream uses 17 to 18 per cent.

It also features less "overrun" (the technical term for the amount of air that's whipped into the mixture while it's being frozen), which makes it far denser than your average ice cream. The Tayfels take pride in the fact that they haven't compromised on taste in order to cut back on calories. "We think that [cream] makes the old fashioned traditional flavoured ice cream," says Mark Tayfel "and there's a core group of people who want that."



## THE TAKEAWAY

**Know your strength, and stick to it - no matter which way the wind blows.**

## THE NOMINEES

# JELLY MODERN DOUGHNUTS



LOCATION **CALGARY**  
OWNER **RITA TRIPATHY**  
EMPLOYEES **20** FOUNDED **2011**



### ★ THE BUSINESS

Cupcakes are so 2010. Doughnuts are the “it” dessert item in 2012, and Calgary lawyer and entrepreneur Rita Tripathy’s high-end shop is leading the way. Jelly Modern Doughnuts burst onto the scene last year with its unique approach to Canada’s favourite pastry – local food legend and pastry chef Grayson Sherman uses a wide array of fresh and inventive ingredients that makes his doughnuts stand out from those most people are used to. Jelly has broadened the market for doughnuts by creating so-called “doughnut cakes” for weddings and birthday parties, and it has even branched out into the lunch business by using unglazed donuts as the bread in its doughnut sandwiches.

### ★ THE CASE

Product placement is a powerful marketing tool, and Jelly Modern Doughnuts took that to a whole other level last year when they managed to get one of their doughnuts into the hands of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, Prince William and Kate Middleton. Tripathy and Sherman whipped up a special doughnut that featured a Madagascar vanilla glaze, Chantilly cream, fresh-baked meringue and a raspberry coulis and called it the “Eton Mess,” which was a take on the Prince’s favourite dessert while at Eton College. “We got a lot of recognition out of that,” Rita Tripathy says. But that wasn’t the first time Jelly modern flirted with fame. Just weeks after the store opened, it made a doughnut for Mayor Naheed Nenshi (a practicing Muslim who doesn’t eat pork) that replicated the flavours of its popular maple bacon doughnut. It’s now a permanent part of their menu – called, appropriately enough, the Nenshi. Not all of their custom-made celebrity doughnuts have been as popular – they made a “Tribble” doughnut for the *Star Trek* convention that didn’t quite work out as planned – but the strategy has clearly helped Jelly Modern get its name in the news.



### THE TAKEAWAY

Be bold, and shoot for the stars. You might just hit them.

Vote online at [albertaventure.com/superstars](http://albertaventure.com/superstars)LOCATION **EDMONTON** OWNERS **JACKIE FOX, DOUGLAS REINBOLD, BRITTANY REINBOLD**  
EMPLOYEES **6** FOUNDED **2004**

# WOMEN WITH VISION



## ★ THE BUSINESS

Conventional wisdom says that you don't limit the size of your market if you don't have to. But Doug Reinbold, who was inspired by the strength that his mother, aunt and sister all showed as they dealt with their nearly-simultaneous cancer diagnoses, decided that his new optical business would be aimed specifically – and, at the start, solely – at women. “Everyone we talked to said we were absolutely nuts just focusing on women,” he says. “But the more I heard it wouldn't work, the more I knew it would.” He was right. The business flourished, even in the face of a wave of new low-cost online optical businesses and a recession that wiped out virtually every other retailer in its building on 105 Street in Edmonton.

## ★ THE CASE

With a storefront that's located in what might charitably be called a neighbourhood in transition – customers are all buzzed in through a back entrance – Women with Vision has always depended on advertising to bring people through the door. They've made a point of getting involved in the city's fashion scene, and if you see a model wearing a pair of frames in Edmonton the chances are pretty good that they came from

Women with Vision. But an even bigger component of their success is their everyman (and everywoman) “Our Brand is You” advertising campaigns that feature customers, friends and family members. “It helped people connect because they could see themselves in it,” says co-owner Jackie Fox. Her favourite was

the Henry campaign that officially announced their foray into men's eyewear, which ended up making the 65-year-old customer-cum-model famous. “The feedback we got from the Henry campaign was unbelievable,” she says. “Henry became a local celebrity, and it wasn't even that much about the frames.”



## THE TAKEAWAY

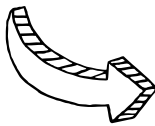
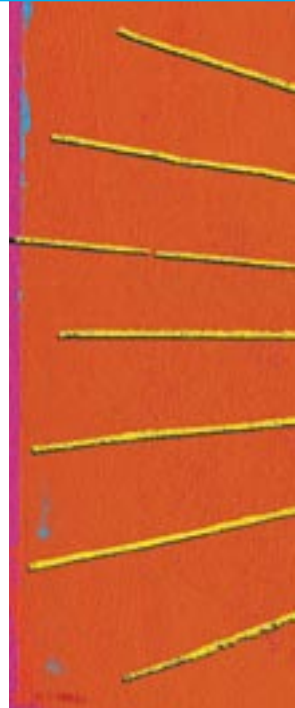
Giving customers a sense of ownership in the business can create a kind of loyalty that lasts forever.

## THE SECRET TO SUCCESS



# SHOUT IT OUT LOUD

Word-of-mouth marketing is a small business's best friend. Make sure you use it right.



### **E**VERYONE LOVES WORD-OF-MOUTH MARKETING.

It's easy, it's free and it can provide credibility. ATB, for instance, relies very heavily on word of mouth – Judy Duncan, the director of marketing for ATB Business, says it makes up for a large portion of their marketing strategy. “Everyone has people they trust, and if they say ‘You should consider so-and-so,’ that can go a really long way.”

But you cannot depend on word-of-mouth as the entirety of your marketing program. Unless you can subsist on a client base of friends and family, you need to reach a broader market to find potential customers. That takes investment (though it does not have to be huge), creativity and strategic thinking about who you want to speak to, where and how often.

---

*“Everyone has people they trust, and if they say ‘You should consider so-and-so,’ that can go a really long way.”*

– Judy Duncan



# 1 OPTIMIZE YOUR WEB PRESENCE

★ Having a website isn't enough. You also need people to find it, and that's where search engine optimization (SEO) comes in. SEO is an Internet marketing strategy that makes your website work with search engines so your company ranks higher in the search results. *The trick is keywords: include words or phrases that users are more likely to search for in your content.* You can also invest in search engine marketing (think Google AdWords), which is relatively inexpensive.



# 2 PRINT ISN'T DEAD

★ The key to effective print advertising is to tailor it to the niche market that's most likely to buy your product or service. *"It's always about reaching the right people, so get as targeted as you can," Duncan says.* For instance, if you run a dog grooming service, you'll have more luck advertising in a magazine for dog lovers than you will running a radio spot.



# 3 EMBRACE ALTERNATIVE MARKETING

★ Businesses love to use Twitter and Facebook as marketing tools because they're free, but online isn't the only place to get free advertising. Incite Marketing's Ted Kouri says *small businesses can benefit from chasing editorial coverage in magazines and newspapers.* "You can leverage mass media by creating a story that's newsworthy," Kouri says. One way to do that, he says, is by raising money for a charity or hosting a great event. It's publicity that also provides the credibility of coming from a third-party source.

## THE NOMINEES



LOCATION **CALGARY** OWNER **CHRIS ROKOSH**  
EMPLOYEES **7** FOUNDED **2011**

# CANLNC INC.



### ★ THE BUSINESS

In retrospect, Chris Rokosh says, she probably had no business starting a company that specialized in legal matters. After all, she'd been a labour and delivery nurse her entire life, and had no formal or practical background in either the law or business. "My learning curve has been tremendous," she says. "I've sought out advisers in many different areas – accounting, law, business – and [have] just been learning as much as I can." She's learned a lot, too. What started as a single consultation for a medical malpractice case in 2001 grew into a healthy consultancy practice and has since evolved into a multi-faceted business that offers training, expert advice and educational services to some of the biggest law firms and pharmaceutical companies in North America.

### ★ THE CASE

Chris Rokosh's big leap forward happened in 2008, when she developed a four-day course called "Introduction to Legal Nurse Consulting" that has since been presented seven times across Canada and is being adapted for distance education and accredited by universities. She then added another line to her business by hiring some of the people that took her course and sub-contracting them to lawyers who are in search of an educated medical expert. "They're telling us that we're doing it with more integrity than has been done before," Rokosh says of her clients. "We've done a lot of work in terms of legitimizing the work of being a legal medical consultant."

The most recent innovation is CanLNC Class Action, a new division which provides analysis and summaries of healthcare information in French and English to firms engaged in class action litigation. Interest in the service she offers is strong, and Rokosh is now in conversations with heavyweights like Merck, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson. In the end, she says, it all comes down to providing a valuable service to her customers. "When you've got healthcare-related litigation, that knowledge is key in order to best represent the client."



### THE TAKEAWAY

It's commonly recommended that you should look before you leap. But sometimes, it pays to jump in with both feet.

Vote online at [albertaventure.com/superstars](http://albertaventure.com/superstars)LOCATION **RED DEER** OWNERS **MIKE KOZLOWSKI, KRISTEN CARLSON**  
EMPLOYEES **4** FOUNDED **2010**

# STEEL PONY FARM



## ★ THE BUSINESS

It's no secret that running a farm these days is a difficult operation. So why did Mike Kozlowski, a self-described "city kid," decide to try and run one along with his partner Kristen Carlson? He traces it back to a trip to Kenya, where he came face-to-face with the fact that he didn't know where his food came from. Now, as the proprietor of Red Deer's Steel Pony Farm, Kozlowski knows exactly where his food comes from – and befitting a former city kid, he uses social media outlets like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to tell his customers all about it.



### SERGE SAYS

*"Be honest with me. Your banker is just like your accountant or lawyer – a partner who's here to help. We have no interest in seeing a business fail, and being up front and open about any problems you might have can help us resolve things before it's too late. Clients think that if they hold back the bad news they can somehow get out of a jam, but most of the time we find out anyways."*

## ★ THE CASE

The conventional wisdom is that farms need to get bigger in order to remain viable, but Mike Kozlowski and Kristen Carlson have gone in the other direction. They've "human-scaled" their farm, which means things like weeding their crops by hand rather than using chemical pesticides, transporting their produce to market by bicycle and cultivating a loyal following of local customers.

But their most important innovation, Kozlowski says, was the decision to start their Food Box Program. People sign up at the beginning of the year for a share of their produce

(it sold out this year before the first scheduled delivery of vegetables) and receive a weekly box of whatever's in season. The up-front cash, meanwhile, buffers them from the boom-and-bust cycle of the weekly farmers' market, shields them from the worst effects of bad weather and its impact on crop yields and helps them avoid digging too deeply into their line of credit at the beginning of the growing season to buy the seeds and tools they need. "Financially, it's the single biggest thing that allows us to work as a farm," Kozlowski says.



## THE TAKEAWAY

**Sometimes conventional wisdom is dead wrong.**

## THE NOMINEES



LOCATION **EDMONTON**  
OWNERS **KRIS SPARROW, ASHLEY BRULOTTE, DARREN STROEDER, SRIDHAR MUTYALA** EMPLOYEES **20** FOUNDED **2011**

# ORIGAMI ACCOUNTING

### ★ THE BUSINESS

A full-time accountant is a luxury that most small businesses can't afford. That's why Origami Accounting, a firm with offices in Edmonton and Calgary, invented what it calls its "Netflix" approach to accounting services. Rather than having to retain the services of an accountant, subscribers pay a monthly fee and send their relevant documentation by mail to Origami. The accounting firm takes care of the rest – including the annual tax filing. "It's a convenience thing for the clients," says Jordan Thachuk, Origami's business manager. "The typical accounting process involves dropping everything off at the end of the year, and there's a mad rush and an abundance of questions. With this, we have contact with the client every month, so a lot of questions are addressed early."



---

### ★ THE CASE

Time and money are two things that are in short supply for just about every small business, but Origami's unique approach to providing a professional service aims to save its clients both. "We haven't reinvented the wheel," Thachuk says. "We've just simplified it and made the accounting process enjoyable. I know that sounds like an oxymoron, but that's what we've tried to do. For a lot of small businesses cash flow is an issue. With our flat monthly fees, they know exactly what they're paying and they're not afraid to contact their accountant." And while it's a great set-up for Origami's clients, it's nearly as good for Origami since their accountants don't have to worry about answering a rush of tax-related inquiries during tax season. Instead, the work is spread out more evenly across the calendar year, which allows the company to hire more efficiently – they just added a third chartered accountant – and grow their business at a more deliberate pace.



### THE TAKEAWAY

There's nothing wrong with taking someone else's great idea and applying it to your own business.

Vote online at [albertaventure.com/superstars](http://albertaventure.com/superstars)LOCATION **CALGARY** OWNER **MATTHEW PROTTI** EMPLOYEES **10** FOUNDED **2009**

# BLACKSQUARE INC.



## ★ THE BUSINESS

Sometimes, one business idea begets another. That's what happened to Matthew Protti, the owner of Calgary's BlackSquare Inc. Protti got started in the wine business by creating Wine Collective, an online wine club that he still runs that offers subscribers access to a curated selection of wine at a considerable discount to retail. He also runs Tannic.ca, a wine-focused flash sale website. But he quickly realized that the real money lay in the software he was using to build those businesses, and developed Blackboxx, an e-commerce solution for the wine and spirits industry that he thinks is the best in Canada – and maybe even the world.

## ★ THE CASE

When the federal government passed Bill C-311 earlier this year, it effectively repealed a prohibition-era federal law that disallowed the inter-provincial trade of wine and spirits. Matthew Protti was ready. "This is the kind of thing that comes along once in a generation," he says. "It's completely changing the way the industry works. The walls have come down and people are trying to figure out what it means." What it means for his business is that more people are going to want

to buy his software, which allows retailers, winemakers and distributors alike the chance to sell their product directly to customers. For winemakers, the appeal is simple: selling directly increases their margins and gives them access to customer data that they didn't have before. Retailers can also benefit from Blackboxx, because it allows them to sell to customers

who aren't in their geographic area. Best of all, since they're effectively renting the software, it costs a fraction of what it would to build out a standalone e-commerce site. The bottom line, Protti says, is that selling wine online is an idea whose time has come. "People like to transact online," he says. "The idea is solid, and the Canadian market is right for it."



## THE TAKEAWAY

Responding to change is the sign of a good company. Leading change is the sign of a great one.

## THE SECRET TO SUCCESS



# THE INNOVATOR'S DILEMMA

Why change might be the best thing for your business



---

*"Innovation is habit."*

– Wellington Holbrook

**T**HERE ARE INNOVATORS, AND THERE ARE entrepreneurs. Sometimes the two categories overlap. But according to Wellington Holbrook, an executive vice-president at ATB Financial, it's more common that they don't. "A lot of entrepreneurs can be innovative," Holbrook says, "but that doesn't necessarily make them innovators." Innovation is a habit, he says, not an act, and the people who have it can be identified by a few distinct traits.



★ Their business plan is covered in editing notes, because they know that what worked in their plan five years ago might not work tomorrow.

★ They have a method for tracking and understanding the pace of technological change in their industry, and know when to schedule strategic reviews.

★ They have sought out a business coach because they constantly want to be challenged in the way they approach and deal with problems.



★ They don't think, "I've got my industry figured out." They know that as a business owner they must constantly be finding new ways to conquer their industry.

★ They are connected to information sharing groups in their local business community, possibly through membership in groups like a chamber of commerce.



★ They have established a board of directors which includes senior people both inside and outside their industry who have more experience than they do.

★ They have hired people who are smarter than them.

## INNOVATION PAYS - LITERALLY.

Holbrook spent several years working with an organization focused on making capital investments before joining ATB Financial. During that time he was involved in approving investments in many small businesses, and he says companies that can prove they have an innovative organizational structure or strategy get a better valuation than companies that can't.

"Strategic investors, when they are evaluating companies, will look at many things like a multiple of their expected earnings," Holbrook says. However, he says venture capitalists will pay a premium for an innovative company because, "an innovative company will demonstrate more opportunities to grow their earnings over time."



## THE NOMINEES



LOCATION **CALGARY** OWNER **DALIA KOHEN**  
EMPLOYEES **30** FOUNDED **2004**

# THE COUP

### ★ THE BUSINESS

There are a lot of restaurants in Calgary, but none quite like The Coup. Dalia Kohen's vegetarian restaurant is more than a place to get a meal, after all. It's a place to share in the company of like-minded people and enjoy food that reflects that worldview. It's also a great place to work, which is why it has a turnover rate that would be the envy of its peers. "We have turnover," Kohen says, "but most of the people that leave end up coming back. People will go to school or go travelling for a couple of months. Most of the solid ones have returned many times over." Some, she says, have even met their future husbands and wives at The Coup. "Too many kids," she says, trying to recall how many have been the product of relationships that started at the restaurant. "Too many weddings."



### ★ THE CASE

There are plenty of good reasons to work in a restaurant, be it the money, the flexibility or the opportunity to meet new people. But good benefits? At many restaurants, the most a person can hope for is a clean apron and a decent meal. Not at The Coup, though. In addition to staff parties that are the stuff of legend and birthday gifts that actually speak to a person's interests or needs (not the standard cake-and-a-card, in other words), The Coup actually has a program that matches the RRSP contributions its employees make. The amount is modest, and depends on how long an employee has been with the restaurant, but it still stands out in an industry where the idea of saving for retirement is often the last thing on an employee's mind. "We're trying to encourage people to save," Dahlia Kohen says. "I think it's a better option than just handing people cash and having them party it away."



### THE TAKEAWAY

**Make an investment in your employees, even if it's a small one. It will pay off in the end.**

Vote online at [albertaventure.com/superstars](http://albertaventure.com/superstars)LOCATION **CALGARY** OWNERS **CAMERON CHELL, ERIKA RACICOT, LES MOTTOSKY AND PAUL READWIN** EMPLOYEES **27** FOUNDED **2009**

# BUSINESS INSTINCTS GROUP



## ★ THE BUSINESS

The idea that a vibrant workplace culture is a valuable asset is so widely trafficked that it's practically a cliché by now, but that doesn't mean it isn't true. And there are few workplaces in Alberta more committed to the idea of culture and the impact it can have on the bottom line than Calgary's Business Instincts Group. This consulting firm stresses the importance of professional and personal goal-setting, and encourages its employees to think about what their strengths are and how they might apply them. According to Judy Garvey, the firm's professional services director, Business Instincts Group has produced an enviable workplace environment. "We could all be working somewhere else, but we choose not to," she says. "Maybe we don't pay the best salaries in the industry and our office isn't the nicest, but it's about the people we work with every day."

## ★ THE CASE

The idea of gathering with your co-workers in the morning and telling them what you plan to achieve over the course of that day might make some people squeamish, but at Business Instincts Group it's a daily routine – and one they look forward to. Among other benefits, Judy Garvey says that it's a great way to build a sense of teamwork and touch base with people you might not otherwise see

during the course of a day.

"Sometimes it's our only interaction with someone if they're in meetings all day and we don't work together," she says. It's just one aspect of a broader commitment to teamwork and togetherness (one that includes a number of other small daily gestures,

like building collaborative musical playlists for the office) at the company, but it certainly seems to pay dividends for employees and management alike. "I told the partners, 'You guys can fire me,'" Garvey says, "but I'll probably just come back and clean the floors."



## THE TAKEAWAY

It's not enough to say that workplace culture is important. You have to show it, each and every day.



## THE NOMINEES

# KODIAK MOUNTAIN STONE



LOCATION **CARDSTON**  
OWNER **JEFF HEGGIE**  
EMPLOYEES **11** FOUNDED **2005**



### ★ THE BUSINESS

Jeff Heggie, the CEO of Kodiak Mountain Stone, believes in the power of positive thinking. So much so, in fact, that he asks the employees at his Cardston-based stone manufacturing business to read up on it on company time. It all started, Heggie says, with a desire to lead by example. He liked to come in early and get his reading done before his employees showed up, because “I didn’t want them to see me not working. But why should we feel guilty about educating ourselves, or our employees educating themselves?” Inspired in part by Google’s 20 per cent time initiative, one that allows its employees to dedicate 20 per cent of their time to special projects, Heggie decided that he’d give his employees the same opportunity.

### ★ THE CASE

Employees at Kodiak Mountain Stone can read just about anything they want – the company library includes books like *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie and *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill – provided they report back to the rest of the company on what they learned. The biggest problem, Heggie says, is that people don’t always take the time they’re offered. “I wish I could force them to use that work time,” he says, “because I know a lot of time the staff get busy and they don’t take that time. I wish they’d take it regardless, but I do have a very committed staff and if there’s a job to do they’ll do it. It’s a catch-22 there.”

There might not be any obvious financial payoff in this for Heggie, but he thinks in the end a happy team is a strong team. “If there are things in your personal life that this can help, that means there will be less stress in your work life as well,” he says. “We’re a tight team, and we’ve got everyone else’s best interests at heart.”



### THE TAKEAWAY

If you’re passionate about something, share it with your team. In the end, it might just be the thing that binds you together.

Vote online at [albertaventure.com/superstars](http://albertaventure.com/superstars)LOCATION **EDMONTON** OWNER **SEAN DAVEY**  
EMPLOYEES **60** FOUNDED **2007**

# BLACKTOP PAVING



## ★ THE BUSINESS

Last winter, Sean Davey, the owner of Edmonton's Blacktop Paving, kept 32 of his employees on through the entire winter season. In the end, while he had them working on some snow removal contracts and doing other odd jobs, the decision cost him an estimated \$150,000. So why did he do it? "If you look at what it takes to find good workers in this market," he says, "it's a good investment. We keep those key guys in the winter so we can train them and get more out of them the next year." That might help to explain why, in an industry where turnover is a given, Davey estimates that anywhere from 70 to 80 per cent of his seasonal workers come back the next year for another kick at the can. "We've done incredibly well," he says. "On our paving crew, which is nine guys, we got all of them back but one."

## ★ THE CASE

Sean Davey isn't afraid to invest in his employees, and when it comes to retaining members of his management team, he's even more aggressive. "If I see a talented guy and I want him to stick around, I give him the opportunity to earn a stake over time. And if he can't afford it, we'll help him finance it." His decision to let his best employees buy small parts of the company isn't driven by altruism – as he puts it, "the

company's only worth what you can sell it for." Having multiple people with both a professional and financial stake in the business ensures that he'll have some options when it comes time to sell. But it's also about creating a culture in which everyone has a stake in the company's success. "The way I'd describe it is 'socialism that works,'" he says. "If everyone is dialed in on our success, it's good for everyone."



### SERGE SAYS

*"It's okay to ask for my advice, even if you're not going to use it right away. I get calls all the time asking for my opinion on an expansion or my outlook on the market or simply what I'm seeing in the community."*



## THE TAKEAWAY

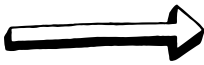
Talented employees are an asset that isn't reflected on the balance sheet. The financial payoff associated with investing in them, on the other hand, often can be.

## THE SECRET TO SUCCESS



# BIGGER ISN'T BETTER

How your small company can  
compete for top talent



*“Small companies tend to focus more on the job description, the skills that someone needs for the role, as opposed to focusing on what really makes that job or their company special.”*

– Rick Harcourt

**A** S A SMALL COMPANY IN ALBERTA, YOU'RE bound to compete with the oil and gas sector, whether you like it or not. With the high wages and opportunities for advancement they can offer, companies in the energy sector can be imposing competitors when it comes to hiring and retaining good people. So how do you attract the employees your company needs? Anne Scott, the business resources co-ordinator at the Alberta branch of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, says it's all about knowing how to sell yourself. "It's the same thing as marketing anything: What is it that differentiates you from anywhere else?"



### FLAUNT IT IF YOU'VE GOT IT

★ As it happens, small businesses actually offer a lot of advantages to potential hires: *increased flexibility, less bureaucracy and the chance to do a wider variety of work and actually have an impact on the business you're working for.* Rick Harcourt, the president of Harcourt Recruiting Services, says working for a small business offers "the chance to shape the destiny of the company – [to] be able to say, 'That happened because of me.' That's not something you'll usually get in really big places."

### » SPELL IT OUT

★ The trick is getting that message out to employees, which is where job advertisements come in. Harcourt says small companies tend to "focus more on the job description, the skills that someone needs for the role, as opposed to focusing on what really makes that job or their company special." *Make your ads about the things your company can offer employees:* flexibility, a great team, engaging work or whatever sets your business apart.

### » ASK AROUND

★ If you're struggling to figure out what's so great about your company, try asking your current employees why they're sticking around and what they like best about working for you. Likewise, when you're hiring, *put a lot of emphasis on employee referrals.* In a small business, if they're referring someone, it's because it's someone they'll actually enjoy working with – and you probably will, too.

## THE NOMINEES



LOCATION **RED DEER** OWNERS **SHEENA JOHNSON AND CORTNEY MURPHY**  
EMPLOYEES **5** FOUNDED **2007**

# THE BRA LOUNGE



### ★ THE BUSINESS

Ever since Oprah Winfrey launched her so-called “bra revolution” in 2005 that sounded the alarm about the problems associated with improperly sized bras, women have demanded a higher standard of service and quality from the people who sell ladies’ undergarments. That’s what they get when they visit the Bra Lounge in Red Deer, where sisters Sheena Johnson and Cortney Murphy bring the made-to-measure experience to women who are shopping for their most intimate items of clothing. Their hard work has paid off, too, as their store was recently awarded gold in the best customer service category by Red Deer Express readers.

### ★ THE CASE

Sisters Sheena Johnson and Courtney Murphy know what it’s like to go bra shopping without the guidance of someone who knows what they’re looking for. They lost their mother when they were teenagers, and bra shopping was just one of the many challenges they had to navigate without her help. When the two opened their store five years ago, they wanted to ensure that their customers didn’t have to go through what they did as they entered womanhood. “I know, having changed into the proper fitting size when I was 24, it can become a life changing experience for someone who’s had a lot of struggles with their bust size,” Johnson says. That’s why they train their fitters not just to be familiar with the various sizes and fabrics but also to know how to help people through what can be a nerve-racking experience. “That first contact really matters,” Johnson says. “We need sincere and compassionate women working for us who really respect and understand the different phases in a woman’s life.” The payoff, she says, can be enormous. “It’s a really neat thing to see a woman get emotional when she realizes that she can start jogging or hit the gym without the frustrations and aggravations of an improperly fitting bra.”



### THE TAKEAWAY

If you’re passionate about customer service and ensure your employees feel the same way, good things happen.

Vote online at [albertaventure.com/superstars](http://albertaventure.com/superstars)

LOCATION **EDMONTON** OWNERS **DANIEL BRAUN,  
EDGAR GUTIERREZ AND CHRIS SILLS**  
EMPLOYEES **28** FOUNDED **2011**

# TRES CARNALES



## ★ THE BUSINESS

Alberta has plenty of Mexican restaurants, but it has never seen anything quite like Tres Carnales before. The Rice Howard Way taqueria has become the go-to lunch spot in Edmonton thanks to its authentic flavours, a charming aesthetic and first-rate team of owner-managers who make sure that everyone feels like they belong. It was featured on the national TV show *You Gotta Eat Here*, and received rave reviews from the *Edmonton Journal's* Alan Kellogg, who wrote that “this is honest, soulful food, worthy of a Morelia street corner or market fonda in East L.A.”

## ★ THE CASE

It's one thing to make great food, which just about everyone agrees is something Tres Carnales does. But what's even more impressive is the fact that it has managed to change the way Edmontonians think about and interact with food. Tres Carnales doesn't take reservations, and the combination of a relatively small number of seats and overwhelming demand creates a daily backlog of customers.

Given that Edmonton isn't a place where people are accustomed to standing

around and waiting for a seat, that combination could have been trouble. But the aggressively friendly customer service – led by the inimitable Chris Sills – and fast-casual set-up (one that's based on a hugely popular American chain called Chipotle Mexican Grill) keeps the line moving and the patrons happy. The lines have grown so big, in fact, that the owners recently created a position

that's dedicated solely to servicing the line, which can include everything from taking orders and answering questions to serving up a cocktail or two. It seems to be working, judging by a July that saw them move 10,000 people through a 40-seat restaurant. “If you put the product first and have fun,” Sills says, “people will wait in line in this city.”



## THE TAKEAWAY

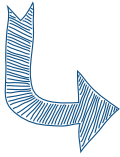
Love your business and show it. Your customers will end up feeling the same way.

## THE NOMINEES



LOCATION **EDMONTON**  
OWNER **COREY MEYER**  
EMPLOYEES **5** FOUNDED **1921**

# ACME MEAT MARKET



### ★ THE BUSINESS

If Acme Meat Market isn't the oldest business in Edmonton today, it's certainly on the list. This butcher shop and meat market has been around since 1921, and third-generation meat enthusiast Corey Meyer (a proud father of two "mini-meats," as he says on his Twitter profile) has breathed new life into it ever since he took over in 2007. And while his cuts of grass-fed beef, pork, lamb and whatever else he can get his hands (and saws) on are second to none, it's his commitment to customer service that makes him so popular with his customers.

### ★ THE CASE

Butcher shops don't tend to have big followings on Twitter, but Meyer and his wife (who runs Acme's official Twitter account) are something of an exception. They routinely tweet to customers about everything from the status of orders and the availability of products to advice on how to cook and prepare their meat. "People come to us with questions on Twitter or Facebook and we actually answer them in a timely manner," Meyer says. "A lot of places you might get a response next week." He's equally happy to accommodate special orders, like the one from a customer who was looking for a beef or pork pancreas for a dog they had with health issues. "Go to Safeway and try to find a pancreas," he says. "But we can do stuff like that. And if someone watches something on the Food Network and wants something off-the-wall, we can do that too – and people appreciate it." But despite his quasi-celebrity status on Twitter and the rave reviews his shop continues to receive from customers, Meyer remains humble and focused. His commitment to customer service, he says, is all part of doing business. "I have to keep them happy so I still have a job to go to."



### THE TAKEAWAY

Customer service comes in many forms, and you shouldn't be afraid to try them all.

Vote online at [albertaventure.com/superstars](http://albertaventure.com/superstars)LOCATION **EDMONTON** OWNER **PETER SCOTT** EMPLOYEES **27** FOUNDED **1952**

# SCOTT PUMP SERVICE



## ★ THE BUSINESS

Scott Pump Service has been selling its services to the mining and oil sands sector since 1952, but it broke new ground this past year when it was recognized by Suncor as its number one vendor (out of more than 3,000 companies) when it came to on-time deliveries and fill-rate performance. Rick Palamaruk, Scott Pump Service's general manager, says this was no small achievement considering the kind of companies that his business was competing with for that recognition. "When you take a look at the vendors to that organization, you're looking at companies like Finning and Acklands-Grainger. We're competing against all the big dogs on campus for this recognition."



### SERGE SAYS

*"The most successful clients I deal with are the ones who are most in-tune with where they are from a financial perspective and have a good understanding of where their cash is. If in that first meeting they're surprised when I show them a net loss on their books, the odds of our having a productive relationship isn't very good."*

## ★ THE CASE

It's tempting to think that customer service is a secondary concern in the oil and gas services sector. After all, with billions of dollars of capital flowing into the industry every year and a skill and service shortage in many areas of activity, it might seem that a company like Scott Pump Service could name their price and overlook the service. Not so, says Rick Palamaruk. "You have to understand the customer's business as well as they do. Otherwise, you'll be

nothing more than a features and benefits provider."

When it comes to providing customer service, it helps that Scott Pump Service has been around since 1952 and has employees that have been with the company for nearly that long. They've seen it all, the booms and the busts, and know how to react accordingly. "The single biggest asset we have is our team," Palamaruk says. "There are a lot of companies out there, but they don't have our team. It's that simple."



## THE TAKEAWAY

**New and improved can be shorthand for new and different. Sometimes, however, it is best to stick with what works.**

## THE SECRET TO SUCCESS



# THE CUSTOMER ISN'T ALWAYS RIGHT



How listening to the conventional wisdom can get your business into trouble



---

*“Listening to customers is an innovation killer, because people will only ever tell you what they know. If you want to be innovative, you have to create things that they’ve never experienced.”*

– Bruce Poon Tip

**G O THE EXTRA MILE. BE PATIENT. NEVER** say no. When it comes to crafting customer experience, the advice often sounds the same, full of tired clichés about providing “service with a smile.” More importantly, it’s frequently wrong. G Adventures, a travel company that began as a small start-up in 1990, is renowned for offering exceptional experiences in both adventure travel and service. We talked to Bruce Poon Tip, the company’s founder, to get his input on the value of these well-worn customer service truisms and what’s actually necessary to create a great customer experience.



### HIRE HAPPY PEOPLE

★ Forget hiring people who can pretend to be happy. Instead, Poon Tip says, create a workplace that actually makes them feel that way. “It’s easy to pay people to read a script and sound like they’re happy, but the modern consumer wants a more authentic experience. You have to create a business model that allows people to achieve happiness. *To do that, you have to give people freedom, you have to give people the ability to progress and grow, you have to be able to build connectedness between your people and whatever it is you’re selling.* Then people want to give customer service, and not because they’re told to.”

### THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT

★ This one sounds intuitively correct, but it can be a disaster waiting to happen. *Don’t just assume that the customer is right – first, make sure they’re right for your business.* “I don’t think you have to be everything to everyone,” Poon Tip says. “Don’t be afraid to lose a customer because they don’t fit within what you’re trying to do. There are bad customers.”



### ALWAYS LISTEN TO YOUR CUSTOMERS

★ There’s some merit to this, Poon Tip says, but only up to a point. “Listening to customers is an innovation killer, because people will only ever tell you what they know. If you want to be innovative, you have to create things that they’ve never experienced. Otherwise, you’ll just end up creating an experience that they’re familiar with. That’s not going to differentiate you. *You usually only have to listen to your customers when you’re doing a really crappy job and you’re trying to improve.*”

### OFFER YOUR CUSTOMERS FREEBIES OR DISCOUNTS

★ Big discounts might seem like a great way to bring attention to your business, but Poon Tip thinks the rewards aren’t worth the risk. “I think discounting is very bad,” he says. *“Our industry is riddled with mass discounters, and it really cheapens your brand and there’s no turning back on that.* You’ll always just be a cheap, discount brand. If you want to go with that model, be prepared. It can be painful to go back on that. But rewarding customer loyalty, or doing giveaways – I think that’s fine.”

## THE NOMINEES



LOCATION **EDMONTON**  
OWNERS **CAMERON GERTZ AND CHRIS MARTYNIUK**  
EMPLOYEES **4** FOUNDED **2009**

# YEG LIVE



### ★ THE BUSINESS

For Chris Martyniuk and Cameron Gertz, it all started with a restaurant in Edmonton's Belgravia neighbourhood called Hulbert's. They planned to stay on the sidelines as silent partners but were eventually encouraged to help run it as a community space, and before they knew it they were booking live events, working with artists and cultivating a reputation within the city's music scene as first-rate promoters. In 2009 they registered YEGLive.ca and used it to run the city's first e-ticketing platform, and in 2010 they put it to the test with their first big e-ticketed event in Edmonton: SOS Fest, a weekend-long music festival along Whyte Avenue. It passed the test, to say the least, and Martyniuk and Gertz have since applied their system to the Edmonton International Film Festival and the Open Sky Music Festival.

### ★ THE CASE

Trying to crack a market that includes a behemoth like Ticketmaster might not sound like a promising business strategy, but YEG Live has carved out a niche for itself among smaller artists and venues that either can't or won't pay Ticketmaster's fees. Instead, YEG Live allows smaller venues and independent artists to take advantage of the benefits of e-ticketing, which can include everything from a larger turnout to better bar sales. It has also partnered with venues like the Pawn Shop, Haven Social Club and the Artery to incorporate their listings into YEG Live's ticketing system. The owners have even started doing business in Atlantic Canada. But no matter how big the business gets, Cameron Gertz and Chris Martyniuk have no intention of trying to compete against Ticketmaster. "We didn't get it into to our head that we wanted to compete with them," Gertz says. "We did it because we wanted to provide tools to event organizers who wouldn't have been able to access them before. We wanted to fill a niche, and to service a market that was being underserved. And we have."



### THE TAKEAWAY

Be willing to adapt, and let the market take you where it thinks you belong. More often than not, it's right.

Vote online at [albertaventure.com/superstars](http://albertaventure.com/superstars)LOCATION **EDMONTON** OWNER **JIM GIBBON** EMPLOYEES **4** FOUNDED **2006**

# AMBER'S BREWING



## ★ THE BUSINESS

Jim Gibbon's family has been in Edmonton for a long, long time – longer, he says, than Edmonton has even existed as a city. So when he decided to start his own brewery, he thought about naming it the Edmonton Brewing Company. Instead, he settled on Amber's, which he says represents the accumulated wisdom and experience of all his ancestors. It's a good thing, too, since thanks to a dispute with a landlord looking to capitalize on rising commercial real estate prices in Edmonton, Gibbon was forced to relocate his brewery to St. Albert. But while his address has changed, the product he makes hasn't. "Sometimes when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade," he says. "And sometimes that lemonade tastes pretty darn good."

## ★ THE CASE

The idea for Amber's came to Gibbon while he was sitting in Lloyd Steier's entrepreneurialism class as a 40-something MBA student. Whether the professor would have shared Gibbon's enthusiasm for entering a market that includes 800-pound gorillas like Labatt, Molson and Big Rock is an open question, but so far Amber's is more than holding its own. With its distinct packaging, unusual names (Zombie Apocalypse and Sap

Vampire Maple Ale, for example) and unconventional flavours like cardamom and cinnamon beer, it's showing up in liquor stores and bars all across Alberta.

For Gibbon, it's all about making that first impression. "Your packaging sells your first six pack," he says, "and the taste sells the second one." It's a strategy that's working, too –

Amber's recently made its first sale to a bar in New York, and has fielded requests from bars in B.C. and Saskatchewan. "Part of it is that aggressive marketing and those silly names," Gibbon says. "But we had a choice: tasty and creative, or bland and cheap. And bland and cheap doesn't pay the bills in an organization like ours."



## THE TAKEAWAY

First impressions matter, but so does the follow up. Don't squander the opportunity.

## THE NOMINEES



LOCATION **SYLVAN LAKE** OWNER **MARK CUSTANCE**  
EMPLOYEES **5** FOUNDED **2006**

# LAKEVIEW COMPUTERS



### ★ THE BUSINESS

At first glance, Lakeview Computers looks just like any other small computer repair shop. But owner Mark Custance, whose parents were also entrepreneurs in Sylvan Lake, brings a level of attention and innovation to the business that sets Lakeview apart from its competitors. He grew his operation from a home-based business to a storefront location, and has consulting contracts with high profile local clients like the Sylvan Lake Walmart and the David Thompson Resort. He's not stopping there, either, as he recently expanded the business to include selling robotics kits and other electronic gadgets and started putting computers into houses that local real-estate agents stage in preparation for sale.

### ★ THE CASE

You may have taken your computer into the shop a few times over the course of your life, but you've almost certainly never been to a place like Lakeview Computers. The dingy grey carpeting that seems to be a staple of every computer repair shop is instead the kind of wood-grain flooring that you'd see in a show home, and the furniture is arranged according to the principles of Feng Shui. There's usually both fresh coffee and good help on standby, and if you come in between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. on a Monday during Lakeview's "walk-in clinic", you can even get your computer fixed for free. "If we can fix it in 15 minutes, it's free," Custance says. "If it takes a little longer, we're usually pretty good about it."

His take on the walk-in clinic is just one of the innovations that have come out of his regular Wednesday morning brainstorming sessions with staff, for which he closes the store until 1 p.m. One of the more recent ideas to emerge from those meetings is the installation of an oxygen bar – another first, surely, for a computer repair shop. "You can get your computer fixed anywhere," he says. "But I can guarantee that you'll never find a place that's quite like ours."



### THE TAKEAWAY

**Just because it hasn't been done before doesn't mean it shouldn't be done now.**

Vote online at [albertaventure.com/superstars](http://albertaventure.com/superstars)

# ANSTICE COMMUNICATIONS



LOCATION **CALGARY**  
OWNER **SHEENAH ROGERS**  
EMPLOYEES **4** FOUNDED **2008**

## ★ THE BUSINESS

When it comes to communicating Calgary's message to the rest of the world, there might not be anyone more dialed in than Sheenah Rogers. As the owner of Anstice Communications, Rogers has watched her firm land contracts with Calgary Economic Development, Calgary 2012, the Calgary Stampede and Tourism Calgary, or what she calls "the big four." More impressive still is the fact that all four clients are outside the firm's true area of expertise, which is the branding and positioning of real-estate projects.



## ★ THE CASE

Rogers might be a rising star in the PR business, but her background is actually in real-estate development. She worked as the marketing and communications director at Calgary Municipal Land Corporation, and helped sell the city and investors on its redevelopment. PR firms kept calling to find out how she'd managed that feat, and eventually she decided it was an opportunity rather than a bother. "Every PR firm was getting involved in real estate, but they didn't know what they were doing," she says. She did, so she decided to strike out on her own. She

started with a kitchen table and a single client – Marble Canyon Developments, which is developing property in Fairmont Hot Springs, B.C. – but grew the business by offering more than her competitors. Still, it hasn't always been easy. "It's something that a lot of people have yet to wrap their heads around because they're used to the traditional model: PR firms and ad firms working in their silos," she says. What people don't realize is that they end up spending more money that way than if they integrated all of that under one umbrella. But the clients we work with do get it."



## SERGE SAYS

*"If you're trying to finance assets that will be used outside of Canada, it's best to plan ahead. Businesses that are active outside of Canada need to understand the different challenges associated with international dealings and meet with me early in the process so we can make sure that they are prepared for what they plan on doing."*

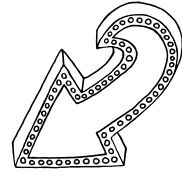


## THE TAKEAWAY

**If people won't stop asking you for help with something, maybe it's time you started charging them for it - you're probably that good.**

## THE SECRET TO SUCCESS

# HAPPILY EVER AFTER



A simple guide to building a productive relationship with your bank (and getting its money when you need it)

### THE 2008 FINANCIAL CRISIS MAY BE A THING OF THE PAST, BUT ED STRAW,

vice-president of strategic business solutions at ATB Financial, says the effect that it had on the way banks lend money is not. Easy money is a thing of the past, and companies will have to do more to show the stability of the business and its earnings. But it's not too late to settle down with your financial institution and build a relationship that can last through both the good times and the bad. Here's how it's done.



#### THE FIRST DATE

★ They say first impressions are the ones that count, and that's certainly true when it comes to forming a relationship with your bank. Straw says he asks a few simple questions in order to screen out risky borrowers. If they can answer "yes" to these questions and also provide a detailed explanation, it will help them secure a loan.

*Do you understand the cash flow cycle?*

*Do you have access to other money?*

*Do you have any flexibility in your forecasts?*



#### GOING STEADY

★ Your business is up and running, and you want some room on your line of credit so you can expand. But your bank will want you to explain how its money will benefit your company in concrete terms before it approves you for new credit. In order to pass the test, be prepared to answer the following questions:

*How will growth change the way you do business?*

*Does this loan give you a new geographical location or service?*

*Does this loan stabilize your cash flow?*



#### GETTING HITCHED

★ When your small business is ready to grow and you need a second loan to finance the next step, it pays – literally – to have good records. They demonstrate how you performed in tough times, which is the ultimate test for a lender. "I want to see [a manager's] performance through a downturn," Straw says. That helps establish a management team's credibility, and makes it easier to approve a loan.



#### DEAL BREAKERS

★ There are certain behaviours that lenders want to see, stick to these so you don't ultimately hurt your chances of getting the funding you need.

##### BE HONEST

Demonstrate that you actually need the bank's money to make your plan work. And if a bank offers you a loan, don't shop the deal around, which can strain the relationship with your current bank.

##### DON'T SIT ON BAD NEWS

Good news can wait, but keep your banker informed of changes that negatively affect your business.



**Good relationships are at the heart of all successful businesses.** Whether it's with customers, suppliers, vendors or even competitors, positive relationships make businesses tick. They're at the heart of what we do, too. With over 260 branches and agencies, a dedicated team of business experts and the best technology available today, ATB Financial builds lasting relationships with our Alberta customers—by offering solutions for their ever-evolving businesses. [atb.com/business](https://atb.com/business)



**There's nothing wrong with buying off the rack.** But when it comes to business banking solutions, you need something that fits your specific needs. That's why ATB Financial offers unique, made-to-order solutions to help your business grow, like six months of interest-only payments on new business real estate loans and extended amortization periods so you can get your building up and running; and a new, online cash management system so you can track your business' finances whenever, wherever—and whoever—you are. [atb.com/business](http://atb.com/business)