

Tribal business flourishes in hard times

Big changes bring big profits to a small business.

By Shannon Keaveny
Spilyay Tymoo

When the lunch bell rings, employees at Warm Springs Composite Products don't waste any time filing back onto the production floor.

Punctuality is important here and excuses for being late aren't taken lightly.

Production must go on.

"A person being even one minute late can hold up an entire crew," explains Jake Coochise, sales marketing manager at the enterprise.

A generous incentive fee tacked on each hour for punctuality keeps employees coming in on time. Eighty percent take advantage of this incentive.

But it wasn't always that way.

CEO Duane Darnell remembers when only 25 percent of the employees were utilizing the incentive program. Darnell's communication with the employees revealed some reasons the incentive program might not work for them.

Some changes were made and success soon became evident in the numbers of employees taking advantage of the pay incentive.

"You can encourage responsibility and that's what will ultimately change things," explains Darnell.

It's this type of approach that has been largely responsible for the financial success Composite Products has seen in recent years.

Darnell believes a good work environment will reflect itself in the success of the company.

The company, a manufacturer of the composite boards



Evan Cochran, a floater and an employee at Composite Products for the last year, cuts the fire-proof boards that the company specializes in. Happy with his job, Cochran hopes to stick around for a while.

Shannon Keaveny/Spilyay

used as a component in commercial fire doors, is a niche market, said Darnell. The company needs reliable people who are trained and ready to go, he said.

Not long ago, high turnover among employees inhibited this need.

"I remember when I started working here seven years ago, we must of went through one hundred employees a year," says Coochise. With a staff of 30, that was an average of about four and a half months per employee.

But now, employees are sticking around.

Marlon LeClair, an employee at the company for the last six years, doesn't plan on leaving anytime soon. He likes the versatility of the job, the good pay, and the hours. Employees at the enterprise work four-day weeks and 10-hour days.

Employees also multi-task and never stay in one position for too long.

This takes the monotony away from the job and gives employees a deeper understanding and investment in the final product, explains Coochise.

Evan Cochran, an employee for the last year, thrives on the many options offered on the

production floor.

He says he doesn't get bored. He also likes the pay, his fellow employees and the work environment.

"Everything has been opened up and our horizons for the business have expanded," he says.

Coochise feels the best thing about working at the company is the unique industry and its high demand.

He says having employees cross-train helps them learn everything about the product, create responsibility for a good product, and ultimately gives the employee more satisfaction.

At Composite Products everyone is empowered to have an opinion, explains Darnell.

Before a purchase is made, operators of the machinery can take a look and let them know what they need. Valuing employees and addressing their needs has played a part in the success of the company.

"One factor in 'growing' a business is 'growing' your own people. If you aren't, you can't operate," explains Darnell.

Composite Products, an enterprise since 1991, has worked itself up from the bottom. In 2002 the company took in record profits and was able to give back nearly \$500,000 to the tribe, a thirty percent increase from the \$350,000 the year before.

In the last year alone productivity rates have increased by 20 percent with the same amount of employees.

A large chunk of the company's growing profits were invested back into the company to improve products, existing processes and to help the company become more efficient.

A key factor in the company's success has been their openness to change and their commitment to protecting jobs while creating more job opportunities for tribal employees.

Because Composite Products manufactures a speciality product, they had only 3 or 4 steady clients.

"This made us very uncomfortable," says Darnell.

Efforts to expand that customer base have increased job security for employees, an especially difficult feat in light of the hard economic times on a national, state and tribal level.

The company went international to expand their customer base and now has a business in the United Kingdom. They also ship to Asia and have done business with Saudi Arabia.

"We now have good international resources and contacts," says Darnell.

Also, efforts are being made to develop a larger variety of products. One goal for the company is to become a ready to assemble supplier.

"That means we want to do all the work for our customer," says Darnell.

Currently, the company is working on three to four other products. Some examples are a fire rated door jam system and fire style rail door components.

The company is flexible on the size of its product, which enhances their chances of getting into other markets. Specialty orders are welcomed.

In the last year, a Chief Financial Officer position was created. As products and the customer base expand, more jobs opportunities are sure to open up. A future plan will offer further education for employees. The company will pay for their books and tuition and offer a flexible schedule to accommodate their workers.

"We're not offering a four-year degree but we'd like to wet their appetites for a further education," says Darnell.

A four-year degree would then be covered by the tribe. If a worker is inspired to pursue a four-year degree because of their efforts, Coochise sees it as a service to the tribe.

"If they return to the reservation or not, it will benefit the tribes," says Coochise.

Employees used to be a little bit suspicious of all the change but now, as they see the positive results, they embrace the change, says Darnell.

"You can't compete anymore selling something in your backyard. If you are afraid of change, you're going to die," explains Darnell.

"If you build, they are going to come," he added.

Warm Springs tackles its number one killer

By Shannon Keaveny
Spilyay Tymoo

Residents of the Warm Springs Reservation live 30 years less than the average U.S. citizen.

With an average life expectancy of about 47 years, a tribal member faces a thirty percent chance of dying in an accident.

Chances are it will be a motor vehicle accident.

Chances are it will involve alcohol.

And chances are a seatbelt will not be worn.

Between 1991 and 2000 accidental death was the leading cause of death in patients at the Warm Springs Health and Wellness Center.

Of all accidental deaths nearly 63 percent of the cases were documented as being related to alcohol use.



A majority of the accidents were car accidents. Of the car accidents, a shocking 72 per-

cent involved use of alcohol. Only four cases in a 10-year period clearly did not involve

alcohol.

Only two cases were documented as having worn a seatbelt at the time of death.

When this information was released in a 2002 mortality report put together by IHS, Warm Springs had already begun to tackle its number one killer.

Montell Elliott, a Warm Springs Health and Wellness Center medical secretary who focuses on health prevention, is using a one year fellowship for community outreach and education on key issues involving auto accidents.

Although a seatbelt law was passed in 1999, Elliott recently formed a Seatbelt Coalition. More residents are already wearing their seatbelts.

In a recent informal survey, 60 percent of Warm Springs drivers and 35 percent of Warm Springs passengers wore their seatbelts during the day.

But, as feared, residents in rural areas wear their seatbelts less.

Simnasho was surveyed and only 35 percent of the drivers and passengers are wearing their seatbelts.

"I think we will see less accidents in the next decade because already more people are wearing their seatbelts," said Nancy Collins, Warm Springs sanitarian safety officer.

Still, the numbers need to go higher.

The coalition's goal is to increase seatbelt usage on the reservation 70 percent by 2007.

Safety Bear is visiting ECE and the elementary school and teaching kids the importance of using their seatbelt.

With the greatest impact of accidental deaths affecting children, adolescents and young adults, individual age groups are being focused on.

About 22 percent of the local motor vehicle accidents deaths involve infants less than a year old. Twenty percent include the ages of one to 14 year olds.

Based on these figures, Elliot started a child safety seat installation clinic in the ECE parking lot.

Every third Thursday of the month, parents can receive car seats, booster seats, and learn to install them safely.

At one clinic Elliot discovered 10 out of 11 car seats were installed incorrectly. Preventing incorrect car seat installation is one way to save lives.

Elliott sees a national trend in accident prevention as health care costs rise.

"With less accidents, we will need to spend less money on healthcare," she noted.

See SEAT BELTS on 7

Local Chamber of Commerce to open this month

By Shannon Keaveny
Spilyay Tymoo

Recently a group of local individuals finalized and adopted a charter for an official Warm Springs Chamber of Commerce.

Now plans are being made to open by Sept. 4, as new members and the board wait for 501 (c) (6) non-profit status for the organization to be approved by both the Tribal Council and the state.

The seven members and the board will meet at the museum

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Gerald Danzuka
President WSCC

the second Wednesday of every month.

The first meeting is scheduled for Sept. 10, 6 p.m.-8 p.m. The chamber will also have a small office in the future tourist in-

formation center that will open up on Wasco Street, off of Highway 26.

Pamphlets and other promotional materials for local businesses will be provided to passing visitors.

A location for another office to address other matters is being sought.

"Our goal is to support all businesses that are conducting themselves on the reservation," explained Gerald Danzuka, the newly elected president of the Chamber of Commerce.

Danzuka estimates tribal

members own 110 small businesses.

"Many of those businesses are cottage industries and some are off the reservation," he said.

Participants hope to establish a legitimate voice for private businesses with a local focus between businesses and tribal government, neighboring communities and throughout the state.

Danzuka envisions forming strong links with the Oregon Native American Chamber of Commerce (ONACC) in Tigard and the National Native Ameri-

can Chamber of Commerce (NNACC).

"Through them we hope to establish a voice on Capital Hill and establish additional funding through legislation," said Danzuka.

A Chamber of Commerce would help small businesses establish credibility in the eyes of officials and address small business needs in the community.

The Chamber of Commerce board will address issues that have a consequence to more than two businesses, said

Danzuka.

The organization intends to educate and involve the public on key business issues by obtaining radio spots on KWSO and having a column in the Spilyay Tymoo.

Fees for individuals to join the Chamber of Commerce are \$25 per year.

"I think the chamber has a good chance and the sooner we get going, the better," said Danzuka.

For more information, contact the Warm Springs Small Business Center.