



Special Report

SPECIAL REPORT - CONSTRUCTION

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Satisfied customer to business partner

*Entrepreneurial opportunities abound;
you simply have to know where to look.*

By Steve Silberman, President - Absolute ConcreteWorks

I've been building businesses for many years. But even I never anticipated that the search for custom countertops for a home remodel would lead to a business opportunity.



After relocating with my family from Santa Monica to Washington my focus was on the adventure of living in a new place and remodeling the waterfront house we'd purchased to create our

dream home. Like many families, we planned our kitchen to be the activity center of our home, and we wanted kitchen countertops that were truly unique.

Granite was our initial choice, but, although beautiful, we were unable to find a granite option that would provide us with the custom look we were after. Our countertop search frustration peaked when we attended a dinner party and saw that our host's attractive granite countertops were identical to the "rare" granite we had been assured would provide us a "one-of-a-kind" look.



Photo courtesy Roger Turk/Northlight Photography

At that point our project manager recommended Tommy Cook, a journey-level finish carpenter and pre-cast concrete artisan who was formally trained in kitchen and bath design. Initial skepticism turned to enthusiasm as Tommy showed us the extensive range of options pre-cast concrete could provide us, from custom colors and finishes to inlays and built-in cutting boards.

We contacted past customers of Tommy's, to see his installed work and learn first-hand about his responsiveness. In each case Tommy's customers were thrilled with both the

work and his dedication to quality and customer service. We hired Tommy and, over the course of our project, we became friends.

Shortly after completing our kitchen Tommy approached me about investing in his business. After conducting extensive research and market analysis, I reworked Tommy's business model and Tommy, my wife, Tina, and I became business partners in the new ABSOLUTE ConcreteWorks, LLC.

My decision to invest was based on a number of factors, including:

The product. Pre-cast concrete's versatility excited me as a consumer, so I knew I could market and sell this product with confidence.

The potential. Concrete as a decorative or artistic medium is growing in popularity nationally, and Tommy, who's worked in the medium for nine years, was the only artisan of his experience and talent on either the Kitsap or Olympic Peninsulas offering this product.

The partner. Tommy's customer service skills were exceeded only by his design skills. I knew his talents, my business experience and Tina's feminine touch would prove a successful business-building recipe.

In early 2005 we relocated to larger facilities in Poulsbo, expanding the workshop and display room space from 2,000 to 6,000 square feet. Continued growth resulted in expanding to 10,000 square feet of indoor fabrication and showroom space, plus 30,000 square feet outside for sculpture gardens, fountains, architectural details and future expansion.

In the business world, "client becomes partner" sounds almost like a fairy tale, a story many dream of, but few believe can ever happen. For me, it's proof positive that business opportunities are everywhere, for anyone with a willingness to use their own experiences to foster successful business collaborations.

Would-be entrepreneurs who are looking for similar business opportunities should keep the following in mind.

Keep an open mind

Opportunities are not limited to conventional start-up businesses or franchise options. There are many operations that have incredible growth potential with the right business plan and active partners. Think about artisans and businesses you interact with regularly, like the drive-up coffee hut where you get your morning latte or the neighbor with the green thumb who designs her friend's gardens part-time.

Be passionate

An opportunity may seem like a guaranteed moneymaker, but if the product or service doesn't excite you, you won't be able to sell it effectively: if you wouldn't buy it, you probably won't be able to sell it. Small business partners must be actively involved for the company to be successful. If you can't picture yourself talking about the business and what it offers, with passion, day after day, you're better off looking for a different opportunity.

Do your homework

Investing in a business has to make good business sense. It's not enough for you to be excited about a product or service; you have to be able to excite others about it, as well. Don't jump in and partner with your favorite landscape artist, friend or handyman. Spend time on research to make sure that there's an opportunity to distinguish the company from others in the same, or similar, fields, thereby creating real potential for business growth and profitability.

Establish good relationships

Effective business partnerships require both diverse talents of the partners and a good personality fit, no matter how pleased you are with the final product or service. Spend time with your potential business partner before you commit to working together to ensure that you can build an effective professional relationship. Potential business partners should have different, but complimentary, skill sets. Like life, marriage or winning sports team, a business has many moving parts and positions to be filled, there must be an alignment of interests, dedication and perseverance in order to be successful.

(Editor's Note: Steve Silberman has been building businesses for more than 30 years. Visit www.absoluteconcreteworks.com or call 360-297-5055 for more information about the company.)