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San Francisco Chronicle

Tips for small-business owners making New Year's resolutions

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Sunday, December 30, 2007

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Joy Kapur came up with an unusual New Year's resolution last year for Maharani, his Indian restaurant on Post Street: to paint 1 million hearts to hang on the walls.

Kapur, 66, had undergone successful open-heart surgery. He had a longtime spiritual belief in the power of love. So he started painting hearts on every piece of paper or canvas he could find, and hanging them in the restaurant. "It is very easy to paint a few hearts, but to paint 1 million hearts is something else," he said.

Kapur's heart project was a novel take on a common practice - New Year's resolutions made by small-business owners.

While millions of Americans make personal vows each year to exercise more, eat less or otherwise improve their lives, countless entrepreneurs also are making resolutions to improve their businesses.

Sixty-nine percent of small-business owners plan to make New Year's resolutions for their enterprise, according to a recent survey by the small-business division of American Express.

More than half - 56 percent - are making resolutions connected to boosting their profitability. About one-third are resolving to be a better boss, get to know their customers better or make more time for their personal lives.

Do such resolutions work?

Sometimes.

Or - just like with those personal weight-loss resolutions - sometimes not.

"Many businesses make resolutions, but few follow up," said Alice Bredin, a small-business adviser in Cambridge, Mass.

Several Bay Area small businesses learned over the past year how to turn their resolutions into reality - and are in a stronger place today because of it.

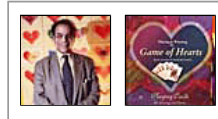
**Resolved: Attend a trade show**

Two years after starting a business making healthy frozen meals for young children, San Franciscan Jill Litwin resolved that 2007 would be the year she introduced her products at a trade show.

Litwin - who works with a mentor to write goals for her Peas of Mind company each year - knew the show she wanted to attend. It was the Natural Products Expo West in Anaheim, which draws supermarket buyers and distributors from around the country.

But simply renting a booth would cost \$4,000. Outfitting it with high-quality displays would be another \$10,000 to \$12,000, which was more than she could afford.

So Litwin came up with a creative do-it-yourself solution. A designer friend used PVC pipe



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and Velcro to create a beautiful booth for free. Litwin drove it down to Anaheim in her jeep. Her mother flew out from Milwaukee to help staff the booth.

"The booth turned out beautifully, and we had so many compliments from people who had been exhibiting for years," Litwin said. "Had these experts had a chance to see behind our facade, they would have been shocked."

The upshot? Litwin landed a national distributor, which had been her second goal for the year.

**Resolved: Buy a farm and update the Web site**

Every year Helen Russell and Brooke McDonnell write a list of about 10 goals for their business, a gourmet coffee roasting firm in San Rafael called Equator Estate Coffees & Teas that serves restaurants such as the French Laundry. And every year they accomplish about five of them.

Last year, the list included buying their own coffee plantation. After numerous trips and an immense amount of paperwork, the two women took possession of a 37-acre farm in the highlands of Panama. "Just to open a checking account there, our paperwork must have been 2 inches thick," Russell said.

Another resolution turned out to be even tougher to achieve. Russell had vowed to overhaul the company's Web site, which featured out-of-date prices. She hired a designer and photographer.

Halfway through the process, the photographer quit, and Russell realized the designer was not giving her what she wanted. "We were not paying enough attention at the beginning," she said.

Russell hired a second design team. What had started as a \$20,000 project mushroomed into a \$35,000 one. She ended up spending nights and weekends working on it.

"Creating a Web site is a lot of work when you're a small business without a marketing department," she said. "You're constantly proofing text and bringing people together to answer e-mails from the Web designer. It was an odyssey to get it done."

Russell finally got the site completed in November. She hasn't promoted it to her mailing list of customers yet, but already Equator's Web business has doubled from five to 10 orders per day.

"You have a better shot getting something done if you put it on paper," Russell said. "You put your resolutions down, then you can see how things shake out."

**Resolved: Get some help**

Cyndi and Ken Burkey have run a Sebastopol business making colorful glass tiles since 2002 but had never turned a profit. At the start of 2007, they resolved to become profitable and to expand the market for their company, Marin Designworks Glass Tile.

But those resolutions were so general that they would have been meaningless - if the Burkeys hadn't reached out for help.


The Burkeys sought free advice from a nonprofit organization called Pacific Community Ventures and took a class in entrepreneurship at a Small Business Development Center. They realized that they needed to market to high-end architects and designers, not just tile showrooms.

They also came up with some more-specific resolutions - to spend one hour every day on strategic marketing, to keep better track of accounts receivable and send out monthly billing statements, and to make a few follow-up phone calls every day to clients.

They're ending 2007 in the black for the first time - barely.

"We felt so busy, we didn't feel we had the time to ask anyone for help," Cyndi Burkey said.

"But when you're in the middle of something, you don't have clarity. Without help from

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(Pacific Community Ventures) and the entrepreneurship program, we wouldn't have been able to come this far."

**Resolved: Do better with last year's resolutions**

Suzanne Tucker, owner of a San Francisco firm called Marketing Solutions, resolved last year to call every client she'd had over the past two decades.

She made it only a quarter of the way through her list.

"The list was too long and I was too ambitious," Tucker said. But, she added, "I'm going to do it again this year. Staying in touch with one's clients is the most important marketing any business can do."

And Monica Michelle, owner of White Rabbit Portrait Studios in San Mateo, was one of many small-business owners who resolved to improve the balance between their work and personal lives - with results that were little better than Tucker's.

"As a business owner and a mother, I have made many resolutions, most of them involving trying to balance my career, motherhood and my marriage better," Michelle wrote in an e-mail.

"I am finding this very amusing since I am writing this in between editing a wedding album, getting dressed for my next photo shoot, taking care of my husband and trying to remember exactly where I left the baby wipes."

Bredin, the small-business adviser, said that it's not enough simply to resolve to work less or spend more time with family. People need to make concrete changes in their business style and structure - or else end up facing the same resolutions a year later.

"Most people who say they want to take more time off need to take a long hard look at their work habits - their use of technology, their ability to delegate, or their willingness to get rid of customers who are not profitable," she said.

Kapur, the restaurateur with the million-heart goal, didn't have to work on his delegating skills to pursue his resolution. His 26-year-old son, Rishi, already was handling the day-to-day management of the restaurant, leaving the elder Kapur free to create hearts.

After a couple of months of painting as many hearts as he could, though, Kapur was still at only a few thousand. "I was dismayed, but I did not give up," he said.

He took a 2-foot-long canvas with 5,000 of his hearts to a nearby print shop, which shrunk it and turned it into a narrow strip of wallpaper border. Then he hung 200 of those strips throughout the restaurant - reaching his million-heart goal. He also printed up decks of cards with hearts on them that are available at Maharani.

Kapur's son - whose own resolutions include modernizing the decor and menu of the 18-year-old restaurant - hasn't been exactly thrilled with the heart project.

"I get nightmares every so often about the hearts," Rishi Kapur said. "But I support him with it if he says he wants to do it."

Meanwhile, Joy Kapur has a new resolution for 2008.

"My coming year's resolution is to have 1 billion hearts in the restaurant," he said.

"I don't know how it will happen, but I'm working on a book right now that will have a billion hearts in it. We may have different minds, but we all have the same heart. I want to tell the whole world: 'We can live in peace if we live in the heart.' "

**Small-business resolutions**

Here are the most common New Year's resolutions by small-business owners and the percentage that make them:

Resolution	Percentage

Be more profitable	56%
Be a better boss	36
Get to know customers better	36
Make personal time for me	36
Get outside help I need	25
Do something to benefit the environment	22
Establish an emergency-preparedness plan	16

Source: Survey of 627 owners/managers of U.S. companies with fewer than 100 employees, by American Express

### Considering some resolutions for your business?

Small-business adviser Alice Bredin offers the following tips to make resolutions work:

- Choose a limited number of resolutions so you're not overwhelmed.
- Set specific goals - such as "increase revenue by \$50,000" rather than simply "increase revenue" - so you can tell when you've hit your mark.
- Write down the steps and timetable needed to reach those goals.
- Make business and personal resolutions at the same time, so they don't contradict each other. "Say your business goal is to double your revenue but your personal goal is to take weekends off," said Bredin, CEO of Bredin Business Information in Cambridge, Mass. "Then you need to add another business goal, which is hiring a senior-level support person to take on some of your workload."
- Share your resolutions with someone else. "Talking them through with someone, even for just 15 minutes on the phone, will make them more attainable," Bredin said. "Even if it's your sister, it's good to have someone help you think out loud."
- Get key employees involved. "Employees' goals need to support the owner's goals," Bredin said. "If employees are high enough to be invested in the success of the business, meet with them and say, 'Here are my goals for the business this year. Here's how I see you fitting in. What other goals do you have?' "
- After three or six months, review the progress on your resolutions and determine whether you need to change tactics.

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*This article appeared on page D - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle*



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