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## Thriving in tough times

Three perspectives on success in business, recession or no

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**Chelle Caruso, shown in Coeur d'Alene, manages four Caruso's Deli restaurants in the area from her office at the Coeur d'Alene store.**

Charles Darwin once wrote, "It is not the strongest of species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change."

More than 150 years later, three Inland Northwest business people – the head of an advertising agency, the owner of a successful delicatessen chain and the executive director of a nonprofit agency – hold similar views.

In interviews, each described what they are doing to not just survive, but thrive during a time in which so many find it hard to do so. They spoke of life philosophies and what has kept them grounded through turbulent transitions. Their advice on enduring in uncertain times doesn't merely translate to the business world. It applies to life in general.

Along with holding a positive attitude, at the top of their list is Darwin's assertion that in order to survive, we must be willing to adapt to what life throws our way.

Larry Stuckart, a 60-year-old Willamette Valley native, is executive director of SNAP, a nonprofit organization serving the needs of the homeless and low-income families.

He recalled how organizations like SNAP were forced to change in the wake of Reaganomics in the early 1980s. "The funding changed to several block grants to the state, which allocated the funds geographically, mainly to Seattle, Tacoma and some farmland areas. But for the majority of the poor, it was misallocated," Stuckart said. "It was very helpful in the long run, but in the interim, we had to do things differently in order to survive."

Heading up an agency that served more than 32,000 individuals last year, Stuckart said in times of perceived hardship, "You have to roll with it and look for opportunities. It's often when things are darkest that some of the best new ideas arrive."

Spokane native Dennis Magner, 43, heads the Magner Sanborn advertising agency, a company involved not just in advertising but also brand design. He believes an inability to change with the times could spell the end of a business.

"Ideas are the product that we provide. And technologies are at play both in the media and tools we utilize to develop and deliver those ideas," he said. "Obviously, the law of accelerating return is at play with all technology, so the more things change, the faster they change, too. So our greatest challenge as an organization is keeping current, across the spectrum. You have to adapt and stay relevant ... or risk becoming obsolete."

Harrison, Idaho, resident Chelle Caruso and her husband started Caruso's Sandwich Company in 1992 and now have a successful franchise business with four stores: in Spokane Valley, Coeur d'Alene, Post Falls and Hayden. Learning how to adapt gave birth to the business.

"We realized how tough it was to be just one store. We didn't have any purchasing, advertising or brainstorming power," Caruso said. "Running a business leaves little time for marketing and growth. In order to take our concept to the level that we wanted it to be, we had to branch out and adapt to business partners. We went from running a store to administration."

But adapting involved their customers, too. "We've become aware that diet, along with value, are at the top of the list for our customers," she said. "We've never offered anything smaller than our generous, standard-sized 'half loaf' sandwich. But with change came the demand for a smaller meal. We had to abandon our 'go big, live large' mentality, which was a good thing. Now there are more options for more people."

### **Advice for the weary**

Drawing on their experiences, each of the three business people offered advice to other businesses trying to make it through rough times.

"Don't look to save your sunken ships," Stuckart said. "Be open to other paths." This was relevant for him when SNAP came up with the idea of opening a used sporting goods store. "We did a business plan from (Eastern Washington University) and obtained new

and used stock before our grand opening. We planned to use profits to fund youth activities and also provide free sporting equipment to low-income youth.”

Then the unexpected happened. Play It Again Sports, a franchise that buys and sells previously owned sporting goods, opened a new store, offering SNAP’s potential donors the option of selling their used equipment. “Needless to say, our donations dried up and we had to close,” Stuckart said. “But the closing of one door is always the opening to another.”

Another approach might be to ask: Do I like what I do? Caruso and her husband have a passion for the product their franchise serves up. “Is this your passion? Is it serving you? If not, maybe it’s time to move on,” she said.

Additionally, she believes that good marketing was key in their success. “When I see a business failing, the first thing I think of is: marketing!”

Magner agreed and asserted that even when times are good, “You can’t drop the ball with marketing.” He also promotes the idea of having a backup plan at all times. “Careful planning is important. Even when times are good, have a Plan B.” And if you do plan to push forward with a dream? “Look for new relationships, new connections. Someone you thought was your competition might actually be a friend,” he said.

### **Life’s toolbox**

Many of the qualities these individuals listed as tools for success in business also apply to success in life. They emphasized a need to take care of one’s mental and physical health, and to balance family, work and play. They also agree that faith was foundational in getting through darker times, such as the recession.

“Look for the positive now, more than ever. You have to have persistence,” Caruso said.

Magner brought up the cyclic nature of life. “Remember that things change constantly. This will be over.”

What philosophies do they keep in their “toolbox of life”? Developing a healthy reliance on others is a key. “I recognize that I need to rely on others, just as they rely on me,” Stuckart said. “I always depend on my expert staff when we are doing housing development. It is so different from my routine activities. I can only check on things, ask questions and assure myself of the ethics and legality of the decisions.”

Magner said he feels a strong sense of reliance on what he calls “cherry-picked” talent that ultimately helps to create a finished product. “When your name is on the door, you feel accountable for everything that walks out of it. But you can’t do it all,” he said. “For me, my proudest moments are when I see amazing work being developed by other people in our firm.”

And in the restaurant business, this reliance is especially true. “There is not a person out there that can run a restaurant on his or her own. Our employees are like family, and the stores are second homes,” Caruso said. “There is nothing more valuable to a business than a dedicated employee. They make it the success that it is.”

She added that compassion and understanding for people are important. “I let people be who they are.”

Magner suggested people keep an open mind and be present in all that they do. “Question everything. Stay involved. Stay present in what you are doing,” he advised. “And remember, it’s a team effort. One person does not make a company. Everyone recognizes the responsibility to stay afloat.”

#### **What keeps you going?**

When asked what fuels their inner drive, all three had different answers. “I like my life. I’m here for the experience,” Caruso said.

Magner is excited about the unknown. “The next idea, the potential. I love a blank sheet of paper,” he said.

Stuckart said he hopes that his time here, in whatever he does, is well spent. “I love my job. It’s challenging and I feel I have something to offer,” he said. “We all understand that when we can help people that are in a downward spiral earlier, sometimes we can keep them from digging themselves into a deeper hole. Knowing that I am an integral part of this organization that can help people cope really does keep me going.”

“In the end, the job is just a means. Don’t let your job compromise the things in life that love you back,” Magner said.

Said Caruso: “Don’t sweat the small stuff. It’s a cliché, but true. I may not have control over events, but I have control over the way I react to events.”

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