

Entrepreneurs share success

By Teri Barnes
staff writer

James Karchon, a Southfield businessman, took an engineering firm he admits was "going down the river" and within three months it had procured \$20 million in sales with a projected \$1 million profit for the year.

A native Detroit, Karchon lived on the East Coast for awhile but when it came time to starting a business venture, he came home to Michigan, a place where he felt comfortable.

Despite the down economic climate, Michigan, like the rest of the Midwest, had one important thing going for it — a strong work ethic — he told a gathering of business people in Southfield's Hilton Hotel last week.

"My personal opinion is this is the best place to start a company. We don't get up to smell the salt air, and look to see if the surf's up. We go to work," he said.

AND THAT'S what 150 business people and aspiring entrepreneurs had in mind at last week's Greater Detroit/Southeast Michigan Entrepreneurship Forum, a workshop promoted to "share secrets" about business successes, from dig-in-hard-work stories to just plain lucked-out accounts.

Sponsored by the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce and a lengthy list of government groups and Michigan corporations, it is one of the few entrepreneurship forums with state funding, collecting \$25,000 for the two-day seminar. In all, 55 business persons, nominated by a forum steering committee, took part as speakers, workshop leaders, planning committee and one monitor, under the coordination of a Columbus, Ohio-based non-profit organization called the Entrepreneurial Institute.

Topics ranged from the "Experiences of Successful Entrepreneurs" to developing workable business plans, finding and keeping good employees, financing new business start-ups, marketing and business promotion and more.

KARCHON, president of Engineering Services Inc., was just one of the so-called business success who shared his secrets for success. Today, his company has offices in Dearborn, Kalamazoo, Florida and overseas in England, but there was a time of uncertainty, he said, when he and three partners first proposed taking over a failing company.

Choosing not to seek venture capital because of the "red tape" of "rules and regulations," they sought out to convince bank officers of their business plan. And therein lay his advice to the audience.

"Don't sell pizzazz, sell conservatism," he said.

"He (the loan officer) must know you and believe in

your team. That's how we succeeded without venture capital."

"You must develop a long-term banking relationship and converse senior bank officers," he told them, adding that junior bank loan officers may not have the authority and experience needed for all business deals.

Beyond that, the work ethic and imagination are vital ingredients to success, he said.

ANOTHER MEMBER of the three-person panel of business successes was John Barfield, an Ypsilanti business owner who told of his personal "rags to riches" experience. With a 10th-grade education and a philosophy that one works hard for what they get, Barfield sold cleaning products and then worked as a janitor before launching his business career. It started in 1954 when he and his wife began what he called "a little janitorial service." The company grew slowly but steadily and came in on a ready market. The home construction market was booming and his company fit right in, cleaning dirty new subdivision homes to prepare them for ready occupancy.

"I got three months leave from my janitor's job (to start the new business), and I have not worked for anyone else since," he said.

He wrote a book called the "Barfield Method of Building Maintenance," still used by the industry, and opened a janitorial school.

He had national and international companies interested in buying him out. In 1969 he sold his company to worldwide conglomerate ITT. The sale made him a millionaire, and at 39 he retired.

He stayed within a short time that he wasn't ready to retire, and so he joined the business world. Today, he owns two firms, Barfield Manufacturing Co., with 500 designers located in Troy and Ann Arbor, as well as outposts in California, Florida and Philadelphia. It is considered one of the most successful minority firms in the country. Barfield Manufacturing Co., which produces screws for General Motors vehicles, has \$17 million in sales this year.

THE MANUFACTURING firm was started after General Motors, impressed with Barfield's previous successes, approached him about starting a new venture. He was challenged, launching the company with 10 employees, a \$100,000 loan and three months to produce 100 units. There are 100 employees. Since starting the business, Barfield has sold 40 percent of it to General Motors. Barfield has said it leaves him with controlling interest, using GM's "status and contacts to grow."

"It's a true relationship, not a front," he said.

7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday 12-4 p.m.

And his advice to the audience: "There's nothing worse than not taking advantage of an opportunity. You need confidence in your abilities, but don't take unnecessary risks. Research very carefully."

Keith Crisp, president and publisher of Crain Communications Inc., called entrepreneurship "a state of mind. I don't think once you get it, you lose it. But you have to share that excitement with everyone around you."

Above all, he said, business people shouldn't be wrapped up in becoming an entrepreneur. They are "empowered," but rather in "building a better mousetrap" and working to produce the best product possible.

Then he quoted a favorite line spoken by actor James Garner in the motion picture, "The Wheeler Dealer."

"You've got to remember that you've got to do it because you love it and the profit is just a way to keep score."

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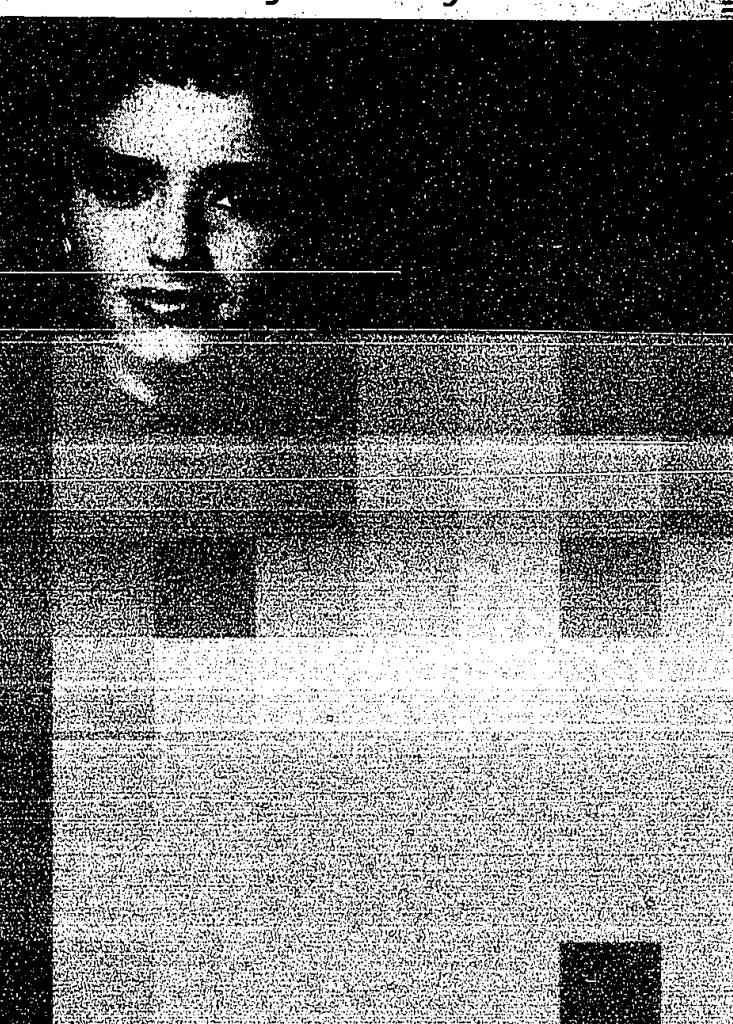
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