

SOHO

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BusinessReport

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9/4 xx2(S)
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Who Ya Gonna Call? Rent-A-Geek Takes On B.C.

BY LORRAINE NEAL

"Who will a third of a million small businesses call when their PCs go on the fritz? Rent-A-Geek of course."

The importance of small businesses to the British Columbia economy cannot be overstated; 98 percent of all businesses are "small"; the majority pay-rolling less than five staffers. In 2003, there were 359,600 small businesses in the province. Of those, 208,300 were self-employed entrepreneurs with no employees (hence, no computer folk on hand).

Vacationing in the Okanagan, B.C. in 1998, Keith Schiehl, an American computer technician, was smitten with the scenic valley and friendly people. The region is known as Silicon Vineyard for its thriving technology industry and world class wineries. Schiehl had a hunch that his expertise could land him some business, so he ran an ad in a local newspaper. "I knew there was a lack of on-site computer services," he says. His foresight was on the money and the calls streamed in.

Not one to ignore a promising business opportunity, Schiehl became a landed immigrant and set up shop in Vernon, B.C., placing himself at the forefront of a burgeoning market. According to Schiehl, Rent-A-Geek is growing at 500 percent annually, with a second shop soon to open and a healthy revenue target of \$400,000 for 2005 already in sight.

It's no wonder Schiehl's idea was on the money. Where do a third of a million small businesses turn when their PCs go on the fritz? It's not like they have the luxury of trotting down to their IT (information technology) departments or spinning off priority flagged "trouble tickets".

This is precisely how I came across Rent-A-Geek. When I gave up the corporate racket for the relative independence of a home-based business, I thought I had my technology needs covered: wireless laptop, high speed Internet access, web site hoster. What more did I need?

Turns out I needed a geek.

An ad in my local newspaper captured my attention. Surely, an outfit loudly proclaiming its geek-ness could fix my computer problem. With some trepidation (do these geeks speak non-bits-and-bites?) I called.

Not only did they correct my problem that day, they offered advice on improving my computer setup...for a price I settled with cash in my wallet. I learned they can service my computer remotely, meaning I can stay home in comfy pajamas, log on to their web site, and using advanced screen sharing technology, a geek will walk me through a challenge, scan for viruses, and fix any problems found. If that isn't enough, a Geek Mobile can be dispatched to my home

and voila, my own personal geek to save the day.

What a concept! I asked for a tour.

Tushar Raichura, a Rent-A-Geek geek for just under a year, leads me to a world map hung on the left wall in reception. Little blue pins flag customer locations. A healthy cluster in B.C., a clump in Louisiana (Keith's previous contacts have stayed with him, Raichura explains). More pins dot the Canadian and U.S. landscapes. Europe, Asia, and Australia also sprout pins. In the technology service world, there are no borders.

In plain view of reception sits Schiehl, eyes trained on a flat screen monitor. An inconspicuous phone set cradles his head; is he speaking to one of his geeks or to himself?

"Okay, Sam, just follow what I'm doing on your screen... Yup, that's my cursor you see moving across your display..." Schiehl is interacting with a client over two thousand miles away in Louisiana, in real time. Rent-A-Geek calls this service Remote 365, or "Click-A-Geek" and it's cutting edge stuff. According to Schiehl, only one other similar company in the province offers this level of advanced screen-sharing service.

Looks like a geek. Acts like... an entrepreneur?

With his spectacles and shaggy coiffure, Schiehl is the epitome of a geek. His eyes are fixed on the computer as he articulates Rent-A-Geek's history. I am reminded of the enterprise IT guys I've worked with over the years. I can't recall a single one who looked me in the eyes. Usually, their eyeballs would train on some item above my head while they explained, in bursts and stutters, a complicated technical issue. Or they'd cast their spectacled orbs down to the floor muttering about the exigency of backups and clearing out temporary Internet files. Usually, they spoke very fast and incoherently. Their language was that foreign to us marketing types.

But, as my questions become earnest and demonstrate my genuine interest

in his mission, Schiehl swivels his chair to face me, locking his eyes to mine. His answers are delivered without hesitation; crisp, confident, *passionate*. Suddenly my neighbourhood geek is a tenacious entrepreneur to rival any CEO I've met in 15 years in high tech businesses.

Schiehl points a steady finger to the goals and forecasts scrawled on a white board behind his desk. He relates his two and five year expansion plans ("...we're moving west to east across Canada, establishing local geeks in every time zone...") and explains how he intends to make it happen. If success is based on sheer determination, I'll be surprised if he doesn't meet these lofty goals.

"The original launch of Rent-A-Geek in 1998-1999 was done in a day, with that first ad," Schiehl admits. "The business ran simply - and small - until 2003, when the workload became so great I was toiling 60-100 hours a week. I realized that working harder was not the solution; working smarter was. I hired a personal coach to help me map out a plan."

It was time to re-launch. Schiehl spent the next six months branding, marketing, recruiting and finally hosting an open house in September 2004. Now, he works ten hours per week "in" the business (technical work) and 25-30 hours "on" the business (strategic planning, marketing, etc).

Schiehl believes the IT industry left a major void by outsourcing its most vital component - customer service. He wants to create a revolution in the industry where the goal is improving the experience of technology users and the technicians who service them.

Hanging out at Rent-A-Geek's offices for a few hours convinces me Schiehl's plan is working. The buzz and excitement are palpable. Schiehl's model seems enviable. These people really are having fun.

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Keith Schiehl says his core values are fun, education and success.

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Not only that, they are professional and *motivated*. "We have team meetings every week, where we collectively set monthly targets," Schiehl explains. "Everyone takes ownership and accountability for success. I'm trying to create a customer-service culture where fun and excitement are the norm."

"We serve people first, and we happen to be great technicians as well," he grins.

What's on the horizon for Rent-A-Geek? Schiehl plans to have three or four offices held and run by the original team within two years, "the real owners in this," he says, and ten franchises in five years' time. I hope he does it. There are a lot of SOHO businesses that will be glad of his services.

Lorraine Neal is a freelance writer and marketer with 16 years experience in Canada's high tech industries. Her company, Write Side Up (www.writesideup.ca) specializes in business communications and target marketing for SOHO businesses, start-ups and corporations. She can be reached at lorraine@writesideup.ca.

Words of Wisdom

- Know what you want, write it down and take action. Hire a business/personal coach. Read, read, read. Especially *The E-Myth Revisited* by Michael Gerber.
- Understand the lifetime value of customers. Encourage your employees to work as hard on themselves (personal relationships, integrity, accountability) as they do on the business.

Lessons Learned

I now recognize that when I experience fear, more often than not there lies ahead a great opportunity. I've learned to use fear as fuel.

PUNDT

Solution:

w	h	e	e	l	g	o	t	e	v	e	r	y	c
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v				i								h	p
e		p		f		k	c	u	b		i		i
g			u		t				r		n		t
o		d				y			o		g		a
t		n					p		f		r		l
t		u							e	g	o		g
o		o		e					n		l		r
d		w		s					a	n	l		a
r		l		i					b		i		i
a		l		o							n	e	n
w		a		n							g		s
t			m	e	s	r	u	o	c	h	s	a	r
h	e	l	i	n	e	s	o	m	e	w	h	e	r

1. bang for buck
2. noise
3. wheel got everything rolling
4. I'm all wound up
5. crash course
6. capital grains
7. we've got to draw the line somewhere
8. fifty pennies

(Puzzle on Page 17)

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