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DEVELOPING WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT INTO A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS

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ABSTRACT: Wildlife management has been developed into a successful business. The company was set up after the principal shareholder was made redundant after over 30 years in the wildlife management field. The company has been successful, as it diversified into a consultancy and supply company, and targeted a wide range of animal species and equipment.

KEY WORDS: wildlife management, vertebrate pest control, rodenticide, pest control operators, pest management, materials and equipment, toxicant formulation

Proc. 17th Vertebr. Pest Conf. (R.M. Timm & A.C. Crabb, Eds.) Published at Univ. of Calif., Davis. 1996.

INTRODUCTION

I have spent the last eight years developing a company known as Pest Management Services, Ltd., in New Zealand into a highly successful wildlife management business. I had spent most of my life involved in wildlife management in New Zealand—starting as a young person at 20 years of age in a business that I thought would last me until I retired. I worked my way up in seniority in the organization to become, in 1970, the Senior Field Advisor of the Agricultural Pest Destruction Council on vertebrate pest matters. This was ad hoc to a government agency and I intended to remain until I attained the age of 65 years. Little did I know, due to changes in government policy, that in 1988 it would be decided to close the so-called organization down and pay off all staff. Therefore, in late 1989 I was a 53 year old wildlife specialist without a job and all I really knew was pest control.

I will admit today that I had visions of retirement and wondered what I could do. Just prior to the closure of the organization, I had gained qualifications as a pest control technician in domestic pest control, and I knew I could survive in that area.

Thanks to the support given to me by my family and friends I decided that since I had over the years supplied information and advice to a large number of staff in the industry and had also trained a large number of them in pest control, there could be at least a part-time business for me as a wildlife consultant.

I, therefore, spent quite a large percentage of my redundancy check purchasing the organization's office equipment which included computers, a slide and photo library, and other allied equipment, such as map cabinets and a library of reference books.

Over a number of years prior to this I had also been computerizing all my research publications for reference material which makes available over 8,000 computerized papers for quick reference. In the six months prior to the closure of the Agricultural Pest Destruction Council they assisted most staff in obtaining other jobs and also backed me with letters to other organizations suggesting that I would be available as a consultant.

Once the organization closed down, I shifted all my equipment to my home and started as a consultant, while at the same time carrying out limited domestic pest control. It was obvious from the start that while there

was work as a consultant in New Zealand, it would not be a full-time occupation; and, due to the nature of consultancy work, I would only be required when there was a problem.

As a result, I spent some time evaluating what was the best direction to take in our business. It was apparent that for the business to succeed I would need to balance hours and dollars over a full year and to do this I needed to diversify. From the beginning I offered free advice over the phone to anyone who had a pest problem and advised many people on a variety of matters, which I still do to this day. Many of the senior people in pest control still contact me for advice or to bounce ideas off me—all of which is done confidentially. Some of these people have given my name as a reference if they are applying for a position, and they often seek my advice on whether they should apply for a job. Although the advice is given free, in terms of public relations it does in the long term bring in orders and therefore dollars.

Within two days of becoming redundant, I obtained a consultancy position that paid me more for a three-day week than I was being paid for my previous full-time position. During the first year I also looked at what was available in pest control toxins in New Zealand and, realizing there was a need for new toxins, I sorted registration of Pindone for rabbit control on two types of cereal pellets and investigated a number of other toxins for a variety of pests. A number of these we have since registered for use in New Zealand.

I also decided there was a need for a one-stop pest shop that could supply a wide variety of pest control tools to help control the wide variety of pests that affect New Zealand agriculture and horticulture. I started approaching a variety of companies both in New Zealand and overseas to see if I could handle their products. We started to handle spotlight equipment, traps, and bait stations for rodents and possums. In the case of possum bait stations, we worked with companies to develop bait stations that would be suitable for use in the field.

From the beginning, we also realized that much of the equipment being sold in New Zealand was supplied with very little information on how to use it correctly. We, therefore, started to supply small information pamphlets on the equipment we sold, how to use it correctly, where to place it, and how to maintain and bait traps correctly.

We also introduced a comprehensive catalog of products, and we readily send a catalog to anyone who requests it. Over the last seven years we have developed the business into a company that has a turnover in excess of six figures in U.S. dollars, and our extensive product range now spans 21 pages of A4 paper.

Consultancy work still earns the company in excess of NZ\$90,000 per year from a variety of clients, including various agencies which include local and regional government, private companies, and private individuals. We employ three people in the company and, while I still carry out a variety of consultancy work, my wife handles the accounts and the other staff member is employed as a consultant who handles advertising, orders, and assists me in consultancy work. We are also involved in assisting with the writing of training material on pest control both for agricultural and domestic pest control. Often we are asked to edit assorted training material produced by health and safety organizations and general publicity information.

To operate solely as a consultant in New Zealand with a population of only 3.5 million people could only be a part-time position, but the inclusion of a sales division combined with a company that readily looks for niche markets has meant that we have a full-time business. The ability to service a variety of pests also ensures that we do not get periods of the year where business slacks off, thus ensuring regular sales. If the problem is not possums, it can be rabbits, birds, rodents, insects or other pests—for which we can supply advice or products to control the problem. This, combined with a low operating expense through working from home, ensures that we can keep prices down, remain competitive, and still make a profit. Other companies with high overheads cannot compete with us and we can retain a high percentage of the market by having lower overheads and, therefore, lower prices.

We as a company continue to evaluate the market in pest control technology and seek other equipment that may sell readily in the marketplace. We also treat all of our customers in a way that they feel important—remembering them at Christmas by sending out presents like diaries, and continuing to produce a quarterly newsletter on pest control that is distributed at no charge to our customers and colleagues.

As a company, we believe that retaining customers is important to the extent that we always send customers a letter thanking them for their order or, even if they only request a catalog, thanking them for the interest they have shown. We also treat every customer as if they are the most important and always aim to send out their orders the day they are received.

We target our products by advertising in home garden, horticulture, pest control and agriculture magazines. In most cases, we include in our advertisements a tear out strip for requesting information. This area alone supplies us with regular orders.

I have found over the years that to succeed in this business you need to keep a reasonably high profile and, as such, I belong to a variety of organizations that relate to pest control. These include the New Zealand Pest Control Association as a Council member, president of the New Zealand Institute of Pest Destruction Officers, member of the National Pest Control Association of USA,

member of Animal Damage Control USA, and a number of other organizations—all of which keep me up to date with new technology and meeting other people in similar types of business. This Vertebrate Pest Conference is an example of this, as over the years attending this conference, meeting contacts, and gaining friends has been of great assistance to me, especially if I strike a problem I need to seek advice on. I also regularly write for magazines on pest control advice and, as stated earlier, we always give free advice. I am also prepared to speak to various groups like grape growers, adult learning clubs, bird breeding clubs, zoological gardens, and other groups interested in specific areas of pest control.

We no longer carry out commercial pest control, as the business has become too cut-throat in New Zealand. However, we do accept specialist jobs, especially control of birds like sea gulls on refuse areas and bird problems in shopping malls and similar places; or we will consider jobs that other people will not consider. Because of this, we have a public liability insurance in excess of \$1 million—this is important, as is professional liability insurance, if you are giving people advice.

When we are approached by customers requiring pest control, we recommend reputable companies or, if they wish to carry out the task themselves, we give advice and supply the material to carry out that task.

We are currently at the stage in our business where we must decide where we are heading in the future. We can stay as we are and continue to seek new products to keep up our share of the marketplace—ensuring at the same time that we can supply the latest in pest control technology to our customers—or we can take the next step and become larger. We get all of our bait made under contract at present. The next logical step is to possibly manufacture our own bait. We could also start up a pest control company and actively seek work in the pest control field.

We are in the process of exporting to Australia and we currently import products from the United States, Australia, Taiwan, China, Italy, Spain, England and other countries. We are currently the agent in New Zealand for B&G and Bell Laboratories of USA, as well as the agent for Vector, Fly City and other fly traps, and the agent for Fenn Traps England, Chemical Enterprises of Australia, and numerous other overseas agencies. We are always looking at new products and different lines that will fit into our business.

IF YOU ARE CONSIDERING WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AS A BUSINESS

Spend some time evaluating what area of wildlife management you are best suited for. Then, if you think you have the expertise that is saleable, you need to decide in which areas you will specialize.

Consulting

When consulting and advising people on their problems, remember that if you cannot solve their problems, you are not likely to secure further work. Furthermore, as a consultant, do not specialize in only one species unless you are sure there is enough work over the year. Specializing in a number of pests spreads the

work over a larger period of the year. If you intend to carry out specialized research, then make sure there is enough work to keep you employed. You also need to set a realistic hourly rate that customers will pay. We have found in New Zealand that customers do not want to pay more than NZ\$50 to NZ\$60 per hour for advice.

As a consultant with a number of clients, it is important that you treat each of your clients confidentially. I find that there are some requests from clients that you cannot act upon as it may affect other clients you already work for. I was once requested to prepare a report on a situation that would have placed me in court as an expert witness against one of my regular customers. In that case, I did not accept the job. On the other hand, you may carry out a task for one customer that in the future is a good basis of a report for another customer. This is particularly so if you are preparing a report on options to, for example, control birds in a shopping center.

Specialized Pest Control

When carrying out specialized pest control work, you will be in direct competition with existing pest control companies. Again, you need to specialize in a variety of pests to keep you employed over the entire year. There is good money in this business if you specialize and present detailed reports and costings and act in a business like manner.

Handling Products

When considering handling products, you will need one or two key lines that preferably no one else has. This could be a bait or toxin that you have registered; however, that is initially expensive to do. Or, it may be a specialist bait station, trap or repellent that you can market. If you are working with another company developing a product or getting it manufactured by them, make sure you have secrecy agreements signed and take steps to ensure they cannot market your ideas. This is where it pays to have a good lawyer. If you are involved in product registration, then you need to form a close working relationship with the people in charge of registrations and with the research groups carrying out research in areas in which you are involved. Remember, however, that they have procedures they must follow and you cannot use friendships to gain an unfair advantage.

Starting a Business

When starting a business on your own, you need advice from a reputable lawyer and accountant to ensure that you set the company up correctly. In fact, it may

pay to take a small business course so you understand what is involved. Many small businesses collapse through lack of understanding or over expenditure of money in the early stages. Ensure from the start that you invest in a small accounting package to make your work easier when sending out accounts. Also, always be mindful of the tax that you must pay each year, and make allowances to ensure you have that money at tax time—otherwise the penalties for late payment increase your financial problems.

Working from Home

Unless you are a self-motivated person, do not work from home. It is easy to not do a full day's work because it is a nice day to do something else—like go fishing or golfing. Additionally, working from home can involve you in work seven days a week and you never seem to leave the office. It is important to allocate an area for an office that is quite separate from the house to ensure the division between the office and your home. I work from home, but I can leave the office, turn on the security and retire to the house.

If you do set up in business, it is advisable that you register your company name so no one else can use it. In the early stages of business we had people trying to use a name similar to ours and we had to get lawyers to stop them. It is a good idea to produce a business card with your photo on it. People will find it easier to put a name to a photo in the future, and it is even helpful when you are in a meeting with a number of other people.

Prepare letterhead and envelopes that have your company name on them—this is good advertising. We also have personalized license plates on our company cars—PESTM and NOPEST—again, good advertising.

Be prepared to advertise your company and your business and join various groups like the Chamber of Commerce, Standards Association, and other organizations that allow you to meet business people. It is surprising how much business you gain. Also be prepared to give good free advice, it repays you over time and often attracts extra business.

Developing wildlife management into a successful business can be a rewarding venture. It is hard work, but is challenging and worthwhile. I personally would never go back to working for someone else full time. Being your own boss is excellent, and you can say no if you choose to. You will make mistakes, but as long as you learn from those mistakes then there is no real problem.

If I can give anyone any further advice, please contact me at anytime.