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Councils provide experts to guide business owners

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Two years after starting a home-based business to keep busy after quitting her corporate sales job, Madelaine Lock found herself in charge of an operation with eight employees and about \$1 million a year in sales.

While she had plenty of sales expertise -- the reason for her security company's precipitous growth -- she had little background in running a business.

So when Lock saw an ad for an Orange County program that sets up free advisory boards for small businesses, she jumped at the chance to get help for her company, SmartWatch Security & Sound LLC of Mount Dora.

"I learned so much," Lock said of the advice she got in 2004 from experts in accounting, marketing, finance and employee benefits. "It was a great steppingstone."

Now the Orange County program that helped Lock grow SmartWatch to 25 employees and \$8 million a year in sales is being replicated in Seminole County.

The Seminole County Advisory Board Council kicked off Thursday night with a reception at Heathrow Country Club for area business and community leaders.

Four small businesses, ranging from an online retailer to a tech company, have signed on with the program, which is starting out with a \$50,000 budget funded by Seminole County, program coordinator Mary Alice McCord said.

The council, which hopes to have 15 businesses on board by next spring, is still recruiting program sponsors as well as area professionals to serve as advisers, McCord said.

Bruce Kubec is one of the first four business owners who will get expert advice. He hopes his advisory panel will help him grow his Lake Mary company, Baskets & Beyond, from a small to a mid-size business.

"I have gone as far as I can go on my skills and knowledge and experience," said Kubec, who bought the

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gift company three years ago and is on target to reach \$400,000 in sales this year. "I need help going further, being able to take the next step."

To qualify for Seminole's program, a company must have been in business at least two years and have at least \$300,000 a year in sales. Preference will be given to Seminole County businesses, but other companies can apply, McCord said.

Once a business is chosen, the council helps the owner identify issues affecting management and growth, then assembles a panel of experts to help. The advisory panel meets with the business owner four times a year.

"Every single board is created to the specific needs of the client company," said Carrie Duvall, program manager of the Orange County Advisory Board Council, the model for Seminole's program.

Since it launched in late 2003, the Orange council has served 74 companies, which have received more than \$1 million worth of donated consulting services from volunteer experts, Duvall said.

Still, the Orange County program could serve as many as 50 businesses a year. But it has had difficulty getting word out to business owners, who are often too swamped by day-to-day demands to step back and work on their companies.

"We have so many terrific, talented advisers waiting to be assigned to businesses," Duvall said.

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