

## **Strategies for Success—Billings Business News**

### **Strategic business assistance available through BEAR**

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In many of my earlier columns, my focus was to identify tools and characteristics that business owners need in order to survive and prosper in economic times like those that we are currently experiencing.

One of the most powerful tools available to many small businesses is the BEAR program, ran by the Big Sky Economic Development Authority (BSEDA). BEAR stands for Business Expansion and Retention. This FREE, no cost program is staffed primarily with volunteer professional resources that provide business owners with ideas and assistance in their business. Linda Beck, director of Business Retention at BSEDA is fondly known as the “Mother Bear”. Linda has been involved with the program since it was first implemented in Billings. Brian Edwards serves as the BEAR program manager.

As the name suggests, BEAR is designed to help businesses expand and stay in the greater Billings community. Professional volunteer resource providers, I am one, are interested in seeing businesses grow and expand. Your next question has to be, “If it is free, why do you do it?” That question comes up all the time! The real reason is that although each of us are busy, there comes a time when we recognize that “giving back” to the community is a desire in many of us. Yes, the possibility of gaining an engagement is certainly possible, however, that is not the reason that most all of us are involved.

The program is very simple to access. A call to Brian Edwards at Big Sky EDA starts the wheels in motion. Brian will collect basic information about your business and then identify one or two resources to come and conduct an interview with you. This interview normally takes about 1.5 hours, following an interview protocol, which contains 135 questions. The protocol is very in-depth and detailed. One thing to understand is that any BEAR team member insures you of complete confidentiality. Each of us signs a confidentiality agreement before being accepted for the BEAR team.

Once the interview protocol is complete, the interviewers will return it to the BEAR team for assessment and discussion. This group, which meets every Friday at Big Sky EDA carefully, reviews all of the answers to the questions that were addressed on the interview protocol, trying to find solutions to the problems that you identified. The BEAR team is comprised of individuals

who are accountants, marketing professionals, professional coaching/lifestyle consultants, management consultants, Job Service officials, Engineers, Chamber of Commerce officials, Insurance Agents, Financial Planners, School District #2 Adult education staff, MSU-B outreach coordinators, non-profit association directors, corporate vice presidents as well as economic development professionals. One of the most enjoyable things in being involved in this group is that there are NO personal agendas—everyone involved in trying to identify the tools and skills that will best help the client. Oh, that does not mean that we do not have healthy discussions—we do! However, we are all trying to find what tools will help the client.

Once the team has identified the appropriate resources to assist the business owner, Brian Edwards calls the owner and informs him/her who will be coming to assist the owner. The first 2 hours of any professional service provider’s time is FREE, done at no cost to the owner. If the owner needs additional assistance after the first FREE 2 hours, then the professional service provider and the business owner enter into a fee-paying engagement mutually acceptable to both.

The BEAR program has been very valuable to many people in Yellowstone, Carbon, Sweet Grass, Big Horn, Stillwater counties. If you need help, Call Brian Edwards, 256-6871 ext 102.

If you have questions or just want to talk more about these matters, give us a call—406-672-6387.

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“I guess if we were to sum up the BEAR program I would say that we are one stop shop for businesses. Companies can receive help in many different areas just by consenting to participate in a BEAR interview. Basically, any type of assistance a company needs can be handled by our resource team.”

Brian Edwards, BEAR Program Manager

