

## Ex-engineer now a “sweeping” success

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Rob Weiner went from testing semiconductors to sweeping chimneys and he says the methodical approach that he learned in his former career is helping him make customers happy.

Weiner started Barberry Chimney Services last fall, after completing an entrepreneurial training course at Northern Essex Community College.

Weiner, a 44-year old Haverhill resident, is one of thousands who lost their jobs at high-tech companies and one of the many that decided to start their own business rather than go back to the corporate world.

Q: How fast are you growing?

A: “I plan to double the business this year and triple it next year. I actually beat my business plan this year.”

Weiner has not yet turned a profit, but expects to do so this year. In his first season he had more than 90 new customers who pay \$125-\$150 per job, which amounts to roughly \$13,900. Weiner also sells chimney supplies and accessories. He employs some temporary help during the fall “silly season”.

Q: Why did you start this business?

A: “Unemployment was used up; severance pay was used up. I had to do something.” He added, “I love being home when my son gets home from school.”

Q: How did you start the business?

A: “I did a lot of research on businesses that have low start-up costs and a decent profitability range, and the ability to be a home-based business.” Weiner considered buying out a Concord, N.H. chimney sweep and followed the man around to learn the business. “I decided to just start my own.”

Q: Is there anyone who aided your start or made it possible to survive?

A: “The Entrepreneurial Training Program. It gave me the confidence and the knowledge of where to research if I have to. In the end, you come up with a business plan. You just learn everything there is to know.”

Q: How will you know when you have made it?

A: “I think I’ve already made it. My interpretation of being successful is to make my own hours, be home with my son and get away from the typical corporate environment.”

Q: Who is your role model?

A: “My brother. He’s been a business owner for years. I’m still too small to apply his advice, but I do plan to use it.”

Q: What is your guiding principle?

A: “It’s almost a cliché, but it’s quality service to give peace of mind to the customers.”

Q: What advice would you offer others?

A: “There’s no room in this industry, “ he said with a wink. “Get a business plan. Do it right. Honesty is another huge part of this business. This business is rife with not-so-honest people. I’d rather have the repeat customers.”

Q: What is your ultimate goal?

A: “I’m going to ride this wave through semi-retirement. As I age, I’m going to probably slope off doing the heavy stuff. I do have an exit strategy.” Weiner added that a service-based business is difficult to sell, but it is possible. He bought some equipment from a chimney sweep in southern Massachusetts who had sales of \$2 million to \$5 million a year, 25 employees and 12 trucks. “I will grow this business,” he said.

Q: What is the biggest threat to your business?

A: “Non-trained competition, uncertified competition. The certified competition in this area, we work together. Another decent threat: the cost of insurance and workman’s comp. It requires a huge customer base to hire employees and put them on.”

Q: Who is your biggest competitor?

A: “Fireside Chimney Sweeps, or Georgetown Chimney Sweeps (which have 25 years in the business).”

Q: What is your advantage?

A: “During the years of being an engineer, I learned a method of giving reports. One of my first customers said, “I don’t understand what you’re telling me about the repairs.” Weiner remembered that his certification instructor had used a digital camera to show customers what was happening on their roof. “I came back and got my video camera. “ Now he includes digital photos and a written narrative with every job. “I don’t run out of the house, telling them nothing. I do an engineering approach to it. Also, I answer phone calls within 24 hours. Contractors just don’t call people back anymore.”