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## Small biz owners share problems

[David Hendricks](#) - David Hendricks

The jokes were thick as seven business owners gathered at 8 a.m. around a boardroom table for breakfast snacks.

“The police chief wants banks to have dress codes for customers to stop robberies,” said one, citing a San Antonio Express-News article. “That's just plain mean-spirited,” said another, pretending to sympathize with the robbers.

The talk turned to business. The business owners each do millions of dollars a year in revenues. They do not have directors. They belong to The Alternative Board instead. They are each other's board of directors.

One just lost a senior manager, who left with only two days' notice. Another is trying to decide between competing merger offers. A family-business owner has a sales staff that isn't moving a new product line. The one who lost a manager is a franchiser struggling to decide whether his best growth opportunity is accepting more franchises or starting additional company-owned stores.

Two TAB facilitators, John Dini and John Sackett, kept the meeting on track, having the business owners discuss their personal lives at the beginning. Some had just taken vacations. One's son is doing well on a high school golf team. Some baby-sat their grandchildren.

A lengthy portion of the meeting was devoted to sales incentives, which ones work and which ones backfire. The carrot-and-the-stick approach usually works, they seemed to agree. Is it fair for a company to send its sales staff on exotic trips as incentive awards while the rest of the company's workers stay behind? No one knew the answer.

In a tough economy, sales incentives are not always necessary. “If you have a job at the end of the month, you win,” one owner commented.

Sometimes the meetings turn tense with tough advice.

“I think you're too conflicted,” Barry Bankler, owner of Gibson Plumbing Co., bluntly told Jeffrey Salter, chief executive of Caring Senior Service, a company providing daily living assistance services to seniors. Salter was trying to decide whether he should continue a double strategy of company stores and franchises. Bankler, an older, more seasoned executive, thought Salter should pick one strategy and stick with it.

Then the meeting lightened up. The owners bantered about their cell phones. Most use the iPhone. They told each other horror stories about computer system crashes before client presentations. Never allow a software upgrade just before a big event, they advised each other.

The recession hovered nearby at times. "We're concerned about the rest of the year. Businesses are laying off people," said Jim Blakey, president of Catto & Catto Benefits Group. "We're holding our own, thanks to new business."

The housing construction slump has slowed business at Gibson Plumbing, but prospects are better in San Antonio than elsewhere. "There are no signs of life in California, Florida or Arizona," Bankler said. "We're in a lucky place."

If luck is hard work meeting opportunity, then San Antonio is lucky. TAB members by definition take their businesses seriously, enough to share experiences with each other. Thirteen such boards meet each month here. The more that happens in any city, the better small businesses will survive tough times and recover.

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