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Friday, July 27, 2007

From kibbutz to coach

Jeff Miller left the chickens of Israel and now tries to help businesses realize their potential

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Jeff Miller made millions for others in ventures as disparate as chicken farming in Israel and selling industrial supplies in New York.

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Then, scratching an itch that hadn't gone away since he worked in his father's business growing up, Miller decided five years ago he wanted a business of his own.

You could say he now has plenty of businesses to run, plus his own, as a business coach in Rockville for Action Coach Business Coaching, currently ranked by Entrepreneur Magazine as the No. 1 business coaching and consulting company.

He's built a clientele worth upward of \$35 million — so he is quick to remind you of how you get to be a client.

"You don't go to a business coach when your business is in trouble," said Miller, 49, who is also chairman of the Rockville Chamber of Commerce. "It's too late. You work with a business coach when you have a business that's thriving, that's growing, that needs to get to the next level.

"Maybe you're working 50, 60 hours a week and you're not seeing your family, not watching your kids grow up. Or maybe you're having some issues with team, maybe you're looking to systematize the business more. I do not work with businesses that are on the verge."

The Business Gazette recently talked to Miller about his background and some of his secrets to business coaching.

Your parents were in business while you were growing up?

Yeah, my dad was an entrepreneur, a retailer. He had a parts store, with radio knobs, TV tubes, transistor radios, batteries ... then it evolved to electronics, stereos, appliances, computers. So weekends, summers, vacations, I was working there, myself and an older brother. My mom was a small caterer; they would go make these dinners for people, from two



Chris Ross/The Gazette
 Jeff Miller said during his early days as a business coach he had to fire a cash-paying client. "And I really wasn't in a position where I could afford to do that," said Miller, "but if a client is not committed to invest the time in doing what is needed, I can't work with them. It was probably one of the more frightening things I've done, but also the most empowering thing I've done as well."



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It was pretty imperative to me that my dad really enjoyed being independent and very much enjoyed not working for somebody else. It was also very apparent that he spent a tremendous amount of time working IN the business. And whether it's watching your parents run a business or your own business, it's important carving out that time to work ON the business. That's probably the most elusive thing, but yet the most important thing.

Which is what your coaching is focused on?

A lot of the work that I do is putting systems into place.

That's one of the steps we talk about. We move from mastery, the first step, which is mastery over time and money issues, the delivery of your product. From there we go to niche [identifying niche in market], from niche to systems, from systems we go to team, from team we go to synergy ... so that things are really operating without you having to be there on a daily basis.

Then from synergy to results, where you can duplicate, or you can get into different investments. And you can continue to run your business if you choose to, but everything is in place so that it can operate without you being there running the daily business. That's the goal of our work. For me to be successful it's based totally on the success of my clients and if somebody's not committed to doing things differently, I won't work for them.

How did you get into the chicken-farming business?

After college, my wife and I got this crazy idea that we wanted to go to Israel, so we ended up living in Israel for five years, and did some chicken-farming that was big business there. I was raising 60,000 chickens at a time. We were living on a kibbutz, an agricultural commune. I was running that branch and I had some people working under me, then we'd get a whole bunch of volunteers when we actually shipped them out to market.

We made a lot of money. You're talking about millions of dollars a year.

Then you decided to come back to the States?

Yes, we just thought it was time. Our daughter was a year old, and all our family was here. The economy here was pretty much in a recession and I did not get a job very easily.

Then after about five months I was hired for a sales position, by a small company out of Alexandria, Va., selling wood pallets, wood skates and plywood boxes. I increased the company's territory in New York by about 300 percent. Then I was promoted to vice president of sales and marketing, and was training people, working with the sales manager, working with suppliers, doing pricing.

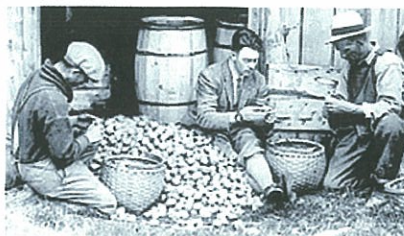
Then my boss and I developed a gift packaging division of the company, crates and baskets, primarily for the food industry, and the cosmetic industry. By the time I had left in 2003, we had grown that division from startup to 3 million [dollars] in sales. It was a good run. I was happy; they were good people to work for. Then it became apparent I wanted to be on my own.

You left not knowing exactly what you wanted to do?

What we say when I talk to my clients about change, we have a formula for change. Dissatisfaction plus the first steps that you're willing to take, times the vision that you have for where you want to go, has to be greater than the resistance to change. And if it is, we change. And if it's not, we don't change.

So I had the dissatisfaction and the first steps I understood, but wasn't quite sure where I wanted to go.

When I was introduced to business coaching, and began to understand it, it was like, 'Man, this is for me.' It's teaching, which I've always loved, it's coaching, and it's small business, working with small-business people like my dad and mom, who are in this for all the right reasons but are inundated by the details and the day to day.



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What did it cost to get in?

My initial investment was about \$55,000 [current initial cost for an Action Coach franchise is about \$75,000].

How did you get your first client?

Through a variety of marketing strategies. The key is if you are doing 10 different strategies and you get 5 [percent] or 10 percent return on all of them you get somewhere between 50 [percent] and 100 percent return on your marketing.

So those early days I was doing mass mailing, I was doing phone calling, I was doing my seminars, literally a whole array of different marketing campaigns. My very first client came through an e-blast I had sent out through the Rockville Chamber of Commerce.

Who was it?

It was actually Rory Coakley [president of Coakley Realty of Rockville].

What did you do for him?

He was looking for marketing ideas, so I gave him a whole range of ideas, like getting more involved in media, radio advertising. Now you hear him on radio all the time.

Shortly after Rory, through a direct mail piece I did, I went to see a company that did international terror assessments, a Web-based business. So if the chairman of Exxon was traveling to Indonesia, they have a subscription to this company, they log in and can see what hot spots to avoid, where to go, not to go. A fascinating business. I did some marketing for them.

In the community, you're involved in the Rockville chamber, but also in Manna, the food bank?

Yes, one of best-kept ugly secrets here is that for a family of four to exist above poverty in Montgomery County, you need \$60,000 in income. As a result, our clientele at Manna — it's not the stereotype that comes in one's mind — it's the working poor, the elderly, deciding between food, drugs or rent this month.

And a quarter of our clientele is children. If you have workers working in the local community, and they're hungry, that affects their production, so that affects the whole community. And if their children are sitting next to my children in elementary school and their bellies are grumbling, then that affects the education we all get, the qualities of all our lives ... these things are not disconnected.

Jeff Miller

Position: president/owner, certified business coach franchise in Rockville, through Action Coach Business Coach of Las Vegas. Prices for services range from employee assessments for \$300 to top-level coaching contracts for \$2,500.

Previous position: executive vice president, Baruch Box, Alexandria, Va.

Education: bachelor's degree, history, City University of New York.

Residence: Rockville.

Family: wife Betsy; daughters Michal, 22; Tamar, 18.

Organizations: chairman, Rockville Chamber of Commerce; board president, Manna Food Center.

Hobbies: reading, cooking, biking, listening to music.