



An Advisory Board Can Put Your Biz on the Path to Greater Success

[Entrepreneurial Support](#) — By [Melanie McIntyre](#) on May 4, 2011 \

Say your business has been up and running for a year or so, you've achieved a certain level of success, and you're eager to expand. What's your next move? Perhaps you should consider creating an advisory board.

Small businesses often lack a big management team or sounding board, so advisors can be a real asset.

“Any small business that has aspirations of growing needs an outside board,” says Chuck Hootman, owner/operator of CycloSPACE, co-owner of [Tip Top Kitchen & Cocktails](#), and co-founder of JUFTi Games.

“Most of the problems good businesses encounter are associated with growth,” he continues. “Scaling any company is challenging, no matter what you sell. It's important for entrepreneurs to be comfortable not knowing all the answers and to ask for help. The perspective from an outside board is invaluable.”

When [Rowe Boutique](#) Owner [Maren Roth](#) decided to expand, she says her advisory board was crucial.

“Even though the business decisions are ultimately mine, I look to them to help make the most well-informed decision that I can, depending on the issue,” she adds.

Rowe's board is made up of four people who “each bring something to the table, whether it is finance, merchandising, retail/wholesale experience, emotional support, or tough love,” she says.

The board was formed about a year after the boutique opened.

“I needed guidance from experienced professionals, so I thought, “Who better to go to than some wonderful family friends” and what started out as some solid advice and guidance turned into us cultivating just the right group of people to help analyze the numbers and get me on track,” Roth says. “It was a happy accident.”

By contrast, Mary Relotto, founder and CEO of [Dames Bond](#), was methodical about forming her business's board.

“I first determined what I needed and then sought out the people within my circle of friends that could help,” she says. “I called each personally to invite them to a meeting. In order to be on the advisory committee for Dames Bond they had to agree to be ‘active’ participants. I'm not interested in having someone on my committee for namesake only.”

Eight women currently advise Relotto on anything from marketing to workshop coordination.

“Besides the fact that I love working with a team of people and I can’t afford to hire the kind of team I need to make Dames Bond a successful business, I created a volunteer team of creative minds with expertise in certain areas, who are more than willing to volunteer their time to help me help our members,” she says.

Created when the business was already established, “but about to take a dynamic turn,” the Dames Bond board meets quarterly as a collective, she says.

Roth meets with her board about every six to eight weeks.

To hear Relotto and Roth tell it, boards are nothing but wonderful resources. So why doesn’t every small business have one? Hootman offers one explanation.

“I think there is this vulnerability hurdle that keeps small business owners from seeking outside advice, a feeling like they will be judged on what they haven’t done right instead of their success,” he says. “Even the big guys don’t have it all figured out, but they know when and where to get the guidance they need. A board can really help a business owner sleep better at night.”

Those who are open to the idea of an advisory board, but want to explore the concept further, have at least one place to turn: [Aileron](#), a Dayton-based nonprofit dedicated to developing small businesses.

Aileron offers an Outside Boards program, a two-part course designed to introduce business owners to the benefits of advisory boards. Participants also learn how to establish a board and tap into the support, feedback, and advice of trusted outsiders.

Part I of the program includes a mock board exercise to observe and experience a board meeting firsthand. During Part II, participants receive personalized support from an Aileron business advisor who will help assess their readiness for a board.

The next Outside Boards program is scheduled for 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on May 27 at Aileron’s campus. The course fee is \$900 and covers up to three people from one organization.

Hootman completed the program last summer.

“I was looking at ways to further my business education and gain a more comprehensive approach to managing my endeavors,” he says. “I have been on a few civic boards and want to transfer that experience to help friends that have businesses in Columbus.”

After his experience, Hootman offers high praise for Aileron, calling it a “a fantastic asset for any business— and it’s only an hour away.”

Whether you decide to take a course or just take the plunge, Dave Sullivan, Aileron’s executive in residence, says business owners only need to address one question to determine if a board is right for them: Will they at least listen and reflect on the advice and counsel being offered?

“If so, a board is a tremendous asset,” he says. “If not, they should not waste their time nor the time of highly skilled people who are willing to help.”

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