

A few years back, Dave Mosher of Mosher & Associates Insurance summed up his view of economic development with a one word definition: attitude.

Attitude is entrepreneurial. Attitude is visionary. Attitude means risk-taking. Attitude is about optimism and confidence. Attitude is perseverance; it has grit. Attitude is genuine passion. Attitude is entrepreneurial (it's worth saying that one twice).

As a community we have invested millions of dollars in our downtown. Evansville's historic presence and our appreciation of historic buildings and architecture are part of our identity. Private businesses have dedicated themselves to preserving historic features when they remodel and renovate. We have rebuilt the downtown utility infrastructure, reclaimed the historic brick street, and added aesthetic amenities to augment the historic nature of the downtown. The community fundraised to construct the Creekside Place Community Center as a social extension of our downtown. And there will be future investments in our downtown, thank you.

But it has been tough. The Great Recession still drags. There are some empty storefronts. And this has been especially trying winter; in the national news, retailers large and small have seen slow sales.

### **Entrepreneurial Journey**

Terry Whipple, the Economic Development Director for Juneau County, was the keynote speaker at our Economic Development Summit in January 2008. Terry is also the founder of the Inventors and Entrepreneurs Club model for rural economic development. Terry talked about the importance of taking creativity and developing it into commercial applications. He described entrepreneurship and innovation as a journey, a journey exploring an idea.

One of the ideas that came from the Summit was to start an Inventors and Entrepreneurs Club here in Evansville. I&E has met for over five years now. It is a real grassroots, bootstrap type group. At 6:30 pm on the second Wednesday of each month, a dozen or two entrepreneurs meet at Creekside Place. They have a guest speaker or presenter provide information on topics such as marketing, intellectual property, business formation, or real life experience from successful entrepreneurs.

The club draws from Janesville, Madison, and beyond. And they network among their members. They bring their own real life experiences. They support each other in listening to and troubleshooting difficulties. They share lessons they've learned. They practice creativity and keep an eye beyond the horizon. I&E is open to all area inventors, artists, small businesses, entrepreneurs, and anyone with an idea.

I attended the I&E meeting last week. Instead of an outside speaker, they had a panel of local businesspeople. Naomi Corridon of the Healing Tree, Cheryl Fuchs of Fox & Hound, and Sue Farnsworth of Studio Repeats/Fancy Farm Girl discussed their starts in business and lessons they'd learned along the way. I was curious about any insight in helping our existing downtown businesses and filling a couple storefronts.

A common theme for these three was that they had taken leaps of faith. They had ideas of what they wanted to do and ideas of how they'd generally approach it. By prior work experience they knew there were things they wanted to integrate into their own businesses, as well as things they wanted to avoid. But none of them started with a formal business plan.

Cheryl commented, "I don't care if you have A, B, and C lined up...all of a sudden F and G will show up." So these ladies did it without formal plans. Attitude is about risk-taking, flexibility, and adaptation.

Sue described her business, "Ignited a flame in me." She said a small business owner has to work hard; she has to open the doors and work the hours. Attitude is about passion and perseverance.

They also advised, "Ask questions of other business owners." The three of them discussed learning about taxes, inventory, accounting, and employees. A great example of the working with other business owners is Naomi's participation in the Good Care Collective of several compatible and mutually supporting businesses.

### **We're in This Together**

Another local group which has shown phenomenal attitude is the Women Encouraging Evansville Entrepreneurs. WE-3 is an informal group of women business owners and managers. They've been meeting on the fourth Wednesday each month since last May. This group has really stepped up to do what it can to improve the community. Attitude means optimism.

First and foremost, WE-3 offers a collegial and welcoming environment. It has proven comfortable for new businesses to join them, and they have grown by word of mouth and personal invitation. When I've asked some of the women about the group, they've used terms such as supportive, collaborative, and mentorship. They share their insights and experience to troubleshoot issues with their peers. WE-3 has started a newsletter to promote their sales and events and to share entrepreneurial resources. The Chamber now hosts a Facebook page geared toward our local small businesses. And the library has started a series of social media workshops for small business.

And WE-3 has taken a keen interest in cross-promotions and supporting each other's businesses. Many know the hours that other stores are open so they can refer their customers back and forth. Last September, the Chamber of Commerce organized the first Sip & Stroll; this event brought dozens of women to our downtown shops for a fun evening. Starting now (next is March 7) downtown shops will be open into the evening on First Fridays. Attitude is about helping each other.

### **Everyone's Responsibility**

At a Chamber luncheon a couple years ago, Alderperson Jim Brooks spoke to a couple dozen local businesses about economic development. In answer to the question who

performs economic development, he said, “Everyone in this room, every day you open your doors...every time you reach out to a customer who may never have crossed your threshold and every time you provide just that extra step in customer service.”

Everyone should take responsibility for customer service. And it needs to be a continual process, all the time. I remember reading somewhere a statistic that eighty percent of companies believe they provide good service, but only eight percent of their customers agree. To be successful, customer service needs to be a continual process.

I recall a conversation a couple summers ago with Todd Culbertson, who owns the Rock N Rollz Sandwich Company. He described his approach to customer service: whether a customer, a supplier, or whoever comes through the door, he has to make each and every transaction count. He deliberately tries to connect with every person with whom he comes in contact. Customer service means looking someone in the eye, smiling, and remembering and using people’s names. It means basic courtesies like please, thank you, and you’re welcome. Attitude is about paying attention.