

A Better Comfort Zone Inc.

Many people become entrepreneurs because they have a role model in the family, but husband and wife team Erica Krueger and Marko Sokacich started their new business out of economic necessity.

Shortly after he returned to work in May 2002 from a work related injury, Mr. Sokacich was laid off from his job as a machinist. While filing for unemployment he learned about the DuPage County Workforce Board and grants available for worker retraining. Because he was a dislocated worker, both living and working in the county, he was eligible for the program and decided to return to school to receive training for a new career. As a machinist, Mr. Sokacich had always been interested in the HVAC field and began classes at the College of DuPage full time for seven months to gain the necessary skills to enter this new line of work.

While Mr. Sokacich was gaining new technical expertise, Ms. Krueger began taking entrepreneurship classes offered by the College of DuPage Small Business Development Center (SBDC) a partner of the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and the US Small Business Administration to earn her associates degree at the college. These classes, offered as part of the NxLevel™ Training Curriculum, are designed to help potential and present entrepreneurs learn skills needed to create, develop and strengthen business ventures. Classes offer hands-on, practical, common sense training, conducted by experienced business educators and feature guest speakers including prominent business leaders and owners. Students are presented with networking opportunities, one-on-one business counseling and support, and comprehensive textbooks, workbooks and resource guides. These low cost classes, offered by 25 Illinois Small Business Development Centers across the state, are supported by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.

Each week, Ms. Krueger and her husband would complete the NxLevel™ assigned homework, gradually building sections of their business plan from scratch. Their new business, A Better Comfort Zone Inc., is a full service heating, ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC) company based in Villa Park, IL.

As part of their business plan, they identified their target market as homeowners in communities surrounding their residence. The training classes helped them develop an initial start up budget, cash flow requirements and financing needs. Upon completion of their business plan, the couple developed their company logo, incorporated their company in Fall, 2002 and began seeking clients. To start A Better Comfort Zone, the couple was fortunate to receive an interest free start up loan from Mr. Sokacich's parents for five years.

Throughout the fifteen week NxLevel™ training class, they relied on the advice of David Gay, Director of the SBDC at the College of DuPage, and course instructor. "Erica and Marko did their homework, and produced an excellent business plan during the NxLevel class" said Mr. Gay. "A Better Comfort Zone is a testimonial to a successful business launch, where thorough preparation, solid focus and structured implementation come together to create a smooth, successful business birth" he added.

To start their business, the couple began marketing a bi-annual preventive maintenance service to homeowners to check furnaces and air conditioning systems. They also recommend energy saving appliances and techniques to save clients money. Their first large contract, to service water fountains under warranty for a major area manufacturer, laid the ground work for establishing their cash flow and a solid base to grow their business.

A Better Comfort Zone's first targeted marketing effort was advertising their services via direct mail with mail pack coupons. Networking with other allied trades yielded other marketing ideas including advertising in church bulletins. They also took out small ads in local newspapers and joined an internet referral service. So far, their best prospects have come from an internet-based contractor referral service that provides qualified leads for residential and small business work. Ms. Krueger is also considering advertising on cable TV as this appears to be a very inexpensive medium with great potential to reach potential clients for service businesses.

Ms. Krueger, who manages the bookkeeping, advertising and bidding of jobs, is pleased with the consistent growth of the company so far. In the year since the company was founded, A Better Comfort Zone's revenues are right on target and growth seems inevitable. While she retains her full time position, she continues to take classes at the College of DuPage in accounting and business. The classes she has taken with the SBDC instructors, she says, have been very helpful in fleshing out ideas and adding greater detail to their business plan. "Dave was great, he really helped us with our business plan. We continue to keep in touch" said Ms. Krueger.

The College of DuPage Small Business Development Center is a member of the Illinois Small Business Development Center Network, working in partnership with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity's Small Business Development Center and the US Small Business Administration.