



Healthy Success



“They gave me my first loan, when no one else would even think about looking at us. Now, as I work on the **Community Futures** loans committee, I understand the loan from the other side of the fence and, on the board of directors, I understand better how the collaborative process works.”

Natures Formulae Health Products Ltd's 400 Products Have One Mantra: For the Health of It

“I wish I could tell you I had this brilliant idea and was on fire to make it happen ...but it wasn't like that,” says Barbra Johnston, owner of Natures Formulae Health Products Ltd, on how she ended up a global manufacturer with 50 employees creating herbal tinctures and other health products.

It's still a great story, though – a friend of Barbra's actually started the business, then ran into difficulties and needed to start the whole thing over from scratch. Barbra was doing what friends do, providing a sympathetic ear, when ...

“I jokingly said, ‘We can start this in my kitchen, ha ha ha. And the next morning, I found myself doing this in my kitchen.’”

Barbra had another job at the time, and her partner owned another business that was his true passion, so the company limped along for three years with no real driving force behind it.

“It was really more like a hobby – I sure didn't put my heart and soul into it,” she says – until a car accident while she was on a sales trip made her re-think her job – and thus her priorities.

“I asked myself, ‘What are you doing?’ I have this business with customers, despite the worst customer service in the world, so what am I doing?”

That one leap, she says, was the hardest part of the whole thing – letting go of the safety net of a secure job and really committing to her company.

Bear in mind, this was back in the early '90s, before 'natural' was a buzzword and when most people thought caring for one's health meant going to the doctor every now and then for prescriptions.

Barbra says she didn't miss the irony of being perceived as a snake-oil salesman when what she was selling actually stripped away artifice and illusory benefit – chemical-free, natural formulas designed to promote good health and healing

The solution, for her, was balance.

“I’m not a fanatic – if I break my leg, I’m not going to try to heal it with herbs and limp the rest of my life. I’ll go into the doctor, get a cast, and then take herbs to speed the healing process.”

That common-sense balance applies in business decisions, too – but for Barbra, it was hard-won.

“I was doing everything – absolutely everything. But as your business grows, there’s just not enough time in the day to do it all yourself. After about a year, I hired my first employee to ship the product and get the orders out.

“I cried.

“It felt like I was giving something away – you feel so inadequate, somehow, admitting you can’t do it all. To know when it’s okay to need help ...that’s hard.”

This lesson of balance is one Barbra still applies, evaluating her own strengths and admitting her own weaknesses. She even hired a CEO coach to help her develop the skills required of big-business ownership.

“Entrepreneurs don’t always make good bosses ... the two jobs require different ways of thinking. I still own the company – but now I have a boss.”

Boss, owner or both, though, she says certain themes are constant.

“Being able to say ‘I don’t know’ is critical,” she says. “So is being able to look ahead and see what your business looks like in the future. Without that vision of where you’ll be, you’re not going to get there. It’s okay to change your mind – the world changes; circumstances change – but you need concrete goals you can set, assess, and use to re-evaluate and gauge your progress.”

So the moral of the story, for Barbra, is balance: balancing confidence with honest self-evaluation; balancing do-it-yourself drive with asking for help; and balancing purpose and vision with flexibility.

And it works – Barbra got her first loan from Community Futures back in the day, but now she’s taking time away from her now large-scale health-formula company to serve on a Community Futures loan committee, helping other entrepreneurs get their start.

“Lots of them, unlike me back then, actually have brilliant ideas,” she laughs.

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Growing communities one idea at a time.

