



In First Aid And Safety, Do-Or-Die Rings A Bell



“We needed a hand to get payroll taken care of until our payments started coming in, and **Community Futures** was there for us. They also helped us with the funds to expand and purchase extra equipment. Without their help, we wouldn’t have been as successful – their guidance and expertise is invaluable.”

You’re working in the backwoods, hundreds of miles from any hospital or doctor’s office, when your colleague slips with his chain saw and is severely – perhaps even mortally – wounded. What do you do?

Most of us couldn’t answer that question, which is why Debbie Bell’s company, Bell First Aid Services, has a market niche to fill.

“When push comes to shove, everyone looks to you, and you’d better know what you’re doing. That can be intimidating,” she says. “You need to have everything in place for a variety of scenarios and variables – you need to know which roads will be open and passable, have ample equipment and supplies, and personnel who know exactly how to handle the tough situations.”

This sort of do-or-die intensity isn’t restricted to the first aid aspect of her business – the whole industry, she says, is based on an all-or-nothing paradigm.

“It’s feast-or famine - there’s either too much work or there’s none. There’s no middle ground in this,” she says of first-aid and safety-officer provision for oil fields, wildfire sites and construction projects. “The trick is using the down time wisely, so you’re prepared for anything.”

A trained EMT who transitioned to teaching first aid and safety after having children, Bell found herself back in the field when a desire for greater financial security and work challenge led her to start her own business.

She rapidly discovered that the feast-or-famine culture applied to every element of the business. Busy seasons would see her out in the field for four months straight, while the slow times would see a market glutted with companies competing for what few clients remained.

“When it’s busy, you don’t just put in your 12 hours. There’s paperwork to be done at night, phone calls to make, people and staff to take care of,” she says. “You have to leave your family for long stretches. It’s not easy, but I’m not afraid of hard work – I like it.”

Not daunted, Bell worked round-the-clock ...what really threw her were the famine times, especially when it came to cash flow.

“We can have payrolls in the hundreds of thousands of dollars; our first-aid trucks can cost upwards of \$70,000 – and sometimes we don’t get paid for two or three months. That’s where the real hardship is.”

She says Community Futures was instrumental in seeing her company through the tough times, helping her manage the exorbitant up-front costs until the cheques started rolling in.

“They’ve been amazing – their only gain is your success, and that comes across loud and clear,” she says.

That assistance, along with very-cautious expansion and a focus on diversification during slow periods, has led Bell to her current status as an employer of up to 20 people, with service hubs in Alberta and B.C., and another one planned for Saskatchewan.

To offset boom-or-bust oilfield growth and the unpredictable nature of forest-fire season, Bell has expanded into the construction field, and she solved the problem of finding stellar staff by starting her own school teaching subjects including safety, first aid, hazardous materials management, confined-space safety and more.

“That way I can pick the cream of the crop – that’s who you want to send out.”

Her only real downfall, she says, is that she sometimes takes the “aid” part of her work a little too far, offering advice and helping out, even when the recipient is her competition, or letting clients know when they’re spending too much on her services, pointing out cost-cutting measures that ultimately cost her.

“I’ve been known to shoot myself in the foot that way more than once,” she laughs.

Creative problem-solving, determination, and relentless hard work may be why others feel Bell is succeeding in a traditionally male-dominated field hard-hit by the economic downturn – but she doesn’t see it that way.

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