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How to Choose and Work With a Mentor

By PAMELA RYCKMAN

AS a small-business owner, you may feel isolated. Without a large organization's resources, you may long for a sounding board for your frustrations and fears or a discreet, impartial adviser with whom to discuss the tactical and strategic challenges of running a company.

Mentors like teachers, coaches, colleagues and friends may have helped guide you through various life stages, but your existing counselors may lack the skills or knowledge to assist with your current venture. Whether you need consultation from a seasoned executive or commiseration from a peer, there are strategies you can use to build the strongest, most effective mentoring relationships. Here are some suggestions based on the experiences of small-business owners and mentoring professionals.

ASSESS YOUR NEEDS Rigorous self-assessment should precede your search for a mentor. "You should understand your values, passions and motivation before asking someone to invest in you," said Richard Caruso, who left a finance career in 1989 to found [Integra LifeSciences](#), a regenerative medicine company in Plainsboro, N.J.

You need to consider your strengths, weaknesses and management style to know what types of mentors will be useful. Are you looking for someone with functional or industry expertise to help with an immediate business issue? Or would you benefit from an outsider's perspective? Do you need a senior adviser or a peer? Short- or long-term relationships? Group mentoring or one-on-one interaction? Answering these questions will help narrow your search. You might consider industry and trade groups, alumni or entrepreneurs' organizations, government-run small-business development centers or online communities.

Female and minority entrepreneurs often find it beneficial to enlist advisers of like gender or race. Dee Elliott, vice president at [King Relocation Services](#) in Santa Fe Springs, Calif., who also owns the travel Web site [YouGottaGoTravel](#), said female mentors empathize with problems of work-life balance and business etiquette. "Women have to be professional, yet remain open," she said. "We

have to be more careful about how we're perceived." In 2003, Ms. Elliott founded the mentoring program at the Orange County, Calif., chapter of the [National Association of Women Business Owners](#).

CONSIDER CHEMISTRY If the mix of personalities is not right, find someone new.

Lena West, founder of [xynoMedia](#), a social media strategy and development firm in Yonkers, met with several advisers before she found the right fit. "Some mentors want to live vicariously through you or always want you to do things their way," she said. "Don't get discouraged if a mentor doesn't work out. Just have a clear goal, accept the misfire and move on."

GO VIRTUAL Traditionally, mentoring has been a face-to-face affair, but Web-based businesses have been using social networking tools to connect small-business people with counselors across the globe. Distance mentoring can give you access to people you otherwise may never "meet" and permits you to search for the specific characteristics you desire in a mentor.

Gary Druckenmiller Jr., co-founder of [TheOpenSea.com](#), an online community of boaters and marine professionals, sought counsel on [PartnerUp](#), a Web site that matches entrepreneurs with associates and business services, when he needed guidance on his start-up. "Using the Internet allowed me to gather unbiased opinions from other small-business owners quickly," he said. "It was the most efficient way to get advice."

Jeff Jones, program director of [MicroMentor](#), said his site worked like "[Match.com](#) for entrepreneurs," aiming at underserved small-business owners like women and minorities. Subscribers create profiles and seek relationships with peers or senior mentors on the site. While participants use the Internet to make connections, once comfortable, partners exchange contact information and communicate by phone, by e-mail or in person.

If you want to try the Internet but are unsure which site is right for you, go first to [Buzgate.org](#), where visitors can hunt for reputable organizations based on their needs and location. This aggregator site provides explanations for and direct links to associations like [Score](#), [Women's Business Centers](#) and economic development agencies.

TAKE CHARGE A mentor used to be a judicious elder who imparted wisdom at leisure to a promising upstart. Now mentees are expected to steer the process.

Be candid about goals and expectations. Establish protocols for when and how often to meet and how best to communicate. Prepare questions and think through options before broaching topics.

Successful mentoring relationships have both structure and accountability.

Many affiliations persist past their agreed-upon timeframe, but each party should assess the value of the bond periodically. Both mentor and protégé should benefit and remain engaged.

MAKE RULES Encourage honesty and build trust — through contracts, if necessary. Trust is essential, so avoid counselors with conflicts of interest, like competing businesses. “As a new entrepreneur, you realize quickly that everyone has ulterior motives,” said Alan Marnett, who established [BenchFly.com](#), a career-development site for scientists, with help from mentors at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Venture Mentoring Service](#), which guides the university’s constituents. The service requires mentors to sign confidentiality agreements and pledge not to invest in businesses led by mentees.

Choose only the most prudent, tactful advisers. “It’s extremely important to protect information, whether it’s about a new product or challenges an entrepreneur is having in his family — the whole pillow-talk aspect,” said Brian Costanzo, senior vice president of global membership at [Entrepreneurs’ Organization](#).

Because trust is harder to build online, Web sites like PartnerUp and MicroMentor encourage users to rate mentors’ acumen and reliability. Still, warns David Hemler, senior vice president of small-business services at the [Deluxe Corporation](#), PartnerUp’s parent company, everyone should do due diligence and “be cautious sharing proprietary information.”

SEEK LOTS OF OPINIONS Do not expect one mentor to cover everything. Cultivate multiple mentors for your personal and professional development.

“One person is not a guru,” said Sherwin Greenblatt, director of M.I.T.’s mentoring service, which provides entrepreneurs with up to four advisers who work together. “With a team you get quality control of ideas and there’s a social aspect. Everyone is learning from the others.”

Balance your instincts with others’ opinions. Entrepreneurs often receive conflicting advice: “trust your gut” versus “be open to advice.”

Disagreements with mentors are inevitable. “Your gut feelings can be strong, especially when there’s a niche you understand better than anyone else. But the more significant the decision, the more I incorporate my mentors’ advice,” Mr. Marnett said. “If you keep rejecting your mentors, they’re going to lose interest.” You need not follow all recommendations, but if you’re routinely disregarding an adviser, it may be time to part ways.

Mentors can also help highlight obstacles or weaknesses you're avoiding or cannot see. Shannon Cassidy, executive director of [Bridge Between](#), a Philadelphia-based executive coaching firm, cited a diffident protégé who preferred not to attract attention with clothes or make-up. Her mentor encouraged her to revamp her image and took her shopping.

“This woman’s entire brand changed,” Ms. Cassidy said. “She had more confidence. It takes creativity on the mentor’s part and openness from the mentee. Sometimes it’s helping someone create a business plan and sometimes it’s helping her pick out a scarf. The relationship can extend into any area of life.”