We Make House Calls

The Knoxville Chamber helps local businesses improve with Chamber Member MD, a “business health risk assessment tool.”

By Garrett Wagley

Only four months after opening his doors, chiropractor Dr. Lee Angle, like most small businesspeople, was working hard at growing his company. But, he says, “We weren’t making a ton of money.” As a caregiver, Angle was struggling to balance making people feel better and making a profit. In fact, he claimed that he wasn’t charging people for all the services he provided—obviously not the best scenario for a new small business.

Then the Knoxville (TN) Chamber made a house call, and soon Angle’s business, Upper Cervical Health Centers of America, was feeling better.

Last March, the chamber began an innovative program based on the idea that businesses could benefit from health risk assessments just like people do. When you take a health risk assessment, you feel better after changing unhealthy behaviors that are revealed in the assessment’s questions about daily activities, eating habits and other lifestyle factors.

Chamber Member MD is a tool consisting of 89 questions that examine all aspects of a company’s operations. Chamber staff members administer it in one-on-one sessions or in group settings. Soon it will be available online. The tool focuses on five areas that are important to all businesses: Financial and Operational Soundness, Technology Awareness, Market and Relationship Savvy, Personal and Professional Preparation, and Legislative and Political Understanding. It asks questions about business planning, financial records, human resource policies, computer security, sales strategies, advertising, public relations, professional development, government advocacy, and many other topics.

Businesses do not have to be members of the Knoxville Chamber to participate. (Non-members are excellent prospects for membership!) All companies receive a plan of action, a prescription for business improvement called Chamber Member Rx.

For Angle, Chamber Member MD’s business health analysis proved to be just what his company needed. Among the things that Angle addressed were internal management issues, planning, budgeting and marketing.

“For me,” Angle said, “Chamber Member MD pointed out things ‘you don’t know that you don’t know’—things I hadn’t thought about. And it made me look outside for additional advice.”

Among the recommendations in Angle’s Chamber Member Rx plan was the suggestion that he meet with the business experts at the Tennessee Small Business Development Center. TSBDC is supported by the U.S. Small Business Administration and provides no-cost business coaching and advice. TSBDC helped Angle streamline his business practices and fix that problem of giving away services. “We’re charging people for the time they spend here, and the business is doing better,” continued Angle. “Chamber Member MD made a real difference in my business... everybody should do it.”
Chamber Member Rx includes a course of action, remedies and a roadmap to address areas of concern identified by answers to the 89 questions in Chamber Member MD. There is a range of suggested services for each item. These include no-cost, low-cost, and professional services in addition to classes, reading materials, podcasts and videos.

In creating Chamber Member MD, the Knoxville Chamber recognized that businesses today have more options than ever for networking, referrals, events, marketing services and other benefits traditionally provided by chambers of commerce. The chamber also wanted to be a more vocal advocate for business, and it wanted to be more aggressive in the delivery of benefits. The Knoxville Chamber knew it could no longer present a menu of benefits and hope that members used them; instead it committed to ensure that businesses were actively improving themselves and addressing their own weaknesses and deficiencies.

"Many businesspeople spend their days acting like firefighters, dealing with the items that require their immediate attention," said Mike Edwards, the chamber’s president & CEO. "The latest sales prospect, the need to return phone calls, customer concerns, and many other things keep businesspeople from focusing on long-term issues, planning and company policies. Chamber Member MD allows people to be fire inspectors. They can take a step back, understand why things happen, make corrections, and formulate strategies to make the business stronger and healthier.”

The program is not just for struggling companies. Even healthy people learn from health risk assessments that they may live longer and function better if they cut down on salt, sugar and alcohol intake, sleep and exercise more, and find ways to reduce stress. Similarly, successful, “fit” businesses will identify strategies to improve by taking Chamber Member MD.

All Occasion Catering, a Knoxville company that has seen growth over the last decade, is one example of a strong company benefiting from the self-analysis. "Taking the assessment and receiving its prescriptions, Chamber Member Rx, helped us understand we should pay attention to making business operations run more smoothly," said All Occasion Catering's owner Neal Green. "For example, we now work to solve potential employee frustrations before they even arise. This has helped us become a more proactive company and we've learned that our ultimate goal should be to make it easier to operate internally and externally. If it’s easy for us to conduct business, profitability is generally going to be there.”

Not only does Chamber Member Rx recommend a personalized list of resources and opportunities to improve the health of the business, but the chamber uses an online tracking system to prompt companies to take recommended actions. That system also reminds chamber staff when to check in with members, and provides valuable information about the specific types of information and benefits that each member needs. In addition, the cumulative results provide excellent market data to support the chamber’s new product and service development. So, instead of depending on a staff person’s hunch or anecdotal evidence to decide what new benefits or programs members need, the chamber will be able to look at the cumulative results of Chamber Member MD and Chamber Member Rx to identify exactly what new services to develop.

"Many chambers have informal consultative relationships with member businesses," said Mark Field, the Knoxville Chamber’s senior vice president of membership. “But the Knoxville Chamber is the only one to develop a product or service that helps each business look at its strengths and weaknesses and then recommends ways to improve. At the same time the chamber will become a stronger organization because it will be programming ‘the right’ new benefits.”

The Knoxville Chamber staff researched the Chamber Member MD project extensively. Among the people who contributed to the project were experts at the University of Tennessee School of Business, chamber board members, small business members, and active and retired executives, including several from Fortune 500 companies. The contributors reviewed the analysis and suggested topics and specific questions. It appears the Knoxville Chamber is unique in providing a service like Chamber Member MD.

“Chamber Member MD gives small business owners an opportunity to discover where their businesses are lacking and then to make the corrections that lead to healthier businesses,” said Jim Blasingame, an expert on small business and entrepreneurship and a nationally syndicated radio host. Blasingame has provided podcasts, videos and other information that is part of Chamber Member Rx.

Garrett Wagley is vice president of policy and public relations at the Knoxville Chamber, which was named the 2011 ACCE Chamber of the Year in the over $2 million revenue category. The Knoxville Chamber is willing to license Chamber Member MD and Chamber Member Rx to other chambers. For details, contact Mark Field, senior V.P. of membership, at (865) 637-4550.