

THE MANAGEMENT JOURNAL FOR CORPORATE GROWTH

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Taking risks

How Eric Schigiel followed his instincts to turn Opustone Granite & Marble Distributors into a success **By Abby Cymerman**

In 2001, when Eric Schigiel founded Opustone Granite & Marble Distributors in Miami, he ran the business with the bold enthusiasm of an inexperienced executive.

He had no strategic plan in place, and he didn't expect the importer and distributor of travertine, marble, granite and limestone to grow the way it has. Today, he has 75 employees and a second location in Jacksonville, and Opustone's revenue increased from about \$5 million in 2004 to more than \$10 million in 2006.

Looking back at his brash naiveté, Schigiel says the company probably succeeded because he was more concerned about doing the right thing for his employees, customers and vendors than he was worried that the venture wasn't going to work.

Smart Business spoke with Schigiel about how he accepts challenges with confidence and why you have to take risks to succeed.

Q: How can other executives grow their companies like you've grown yours?

It has a lot to do with the employees that you have by your side. You can't grow alone. You want the people to be with you long term, and you want them to help you be successful.

You have to let them know that. You have to empower the people who are with you.

I do it on a personal level with relationships. A lot of company owners make their people feel that they're lower than them, as opposed to giving them the same feeling that we're all at the same level — whether we work in the warehouse, clean the bathrooms or are the top salesman or sales manager.

There are social things that we do together, although they know there's that line. You can't pass the line just because you're friends or attend social events together. One has absolutely nothing to do with the other.

You also can grow your company by going with what you think is right. You can take other people's advice to help you make your judgment, but ultimately, you have to go with what you want to do, what you think is

right and take some sort of risk.

You can't be right all the time, but if you're growing a business, chances are you have the right idea. Stay on that track, and keep up to date with the trends. You can't stop doing that because you're growing. You have to continuously update your product, materials and the company.

If you don't take the risk, you're going to stay stagnant. That's something that I learned along the road. At the beginning, I honestly didn't have such a good grasp on what I was doing.



Q: What happened to change that?

Time, and banging my head against the wall for a few years. It either makes you or breaks you.

It definitely helped me to realize that you have to trust certain people in the business and in your market, and take their advice. I put everything together, and I ultimately make my own decisions.

Q: How can CEOs make decisions regarding growth?

It depends on where you are as a company. This last year we had a slowdown in the real estate market in South Florida. I had my best suppliers telling me to hold off, telling me not to buy. They said, 'We're going to hit a bottom that is going to hurt everybody.'

That's the one piece of advice that you would think I would take, but I didn't. Regardless of the market, there's still room for growth. The economy's not going to come to an end, and I have to keep that in mind.

Q: Is it difficult to stay focused when the opportunities aren't coming as quickly?

It's hard because you get a little uneasy. I can't control the market, but I can control the way I handle my business when the market takes a slowdown.

Q: What one thing can prevent a company from growing?

Being close-minded. You have to be able to take constructive criticism from everyone, and you can't take things personally. You benefit from it because people who have more experience are giving you advice.

Just because your business is growing doesn't mean everything you do is going to be right. If somebody feels that there could be a better way to do it, you have to look at it and analyze it. Nobody's perfect.

Q: What advice would you share with another executive trying to grow his or her company?

Don't wait for the growth to come to you. You have to be aggressive. Search for it, and make it happen. Anybody can stay at a certain level and have a good business, but you won't grow unless you go after it.

Growth is not a money issue. You have to do it for the accomplishment. It's a lot of stress, and it takes six or seven days of your week, 15 or 16 hours a day, if not more.

It's not something that everybody wants to do; you have to want to do it.

HOW TO REACH: Opustone Granite & Marble Distributors, (888) 900-6787 or www.opustone.com