

Chicago entrepreneurs share their 2010 New Year's resolutions

By Christina Le Beau

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If 2009 is a year you'd rather forget, you'd be in good company. But with a whole new year ahead, it's time to rethink, start fresh and aim high. We checked in with 10 local entrepreneurs to see how they plan to make 2010 a year to remember. Maybe their ideas will inspire some resolutions for your own small business.

BUY TO DIVERSIFY

Josh Johnson, 38

Fidelitone Logistics, Wauconda

Supply-chain management

2009 sales: \$350 million

"We want to complete at least two acquisitions that further expand and diversify our service offerings. As we increase the scope of solutions we offer clients, we can reduce the logistics costs and number of suppliers each client has to work with. To drive that strategy, we've promoted our former director of mergers and acquisitions to serve as vice-president of strategic affairs. He'll be responsible for analyzing future investment targets, including companies with a distribution and/or transportation focus."

SHED UNPROFITABLE CUSTOMERS

John Quinn, 41

Merrimac Solutions Inc., Lisle

System-integration consultants

2009 sales: \$1.2 million

"At the beginning of 2009, we started analyzing our books to see which customers utilize most of our time but generate the least amount of revenue and profit. It was alarming. Most of these companies were not interested in committing to a minimum number of billable hours per month. So in 2010, we plan to discontinue providing service to several needy and unprofitable customers and will provide a referral to smaller value-added resellers so the customer is taken care of and there is a smooth transition."

LET PRINCIPLES RULE

Julie Savitt, 43

AMS Earth Movers Inc., Lake Bluff

Construction hauling

2009 sales: \$1.5 million

"I will associate myself with others who have the same beliefs, integrity and drive as I do. I believe that a morally sound, integrity-driven person naturally leans toward the preservation of the earth for future generations, so this will include expanding my workforce's capabilities to handle contracts that include eco-friendly services. I'll be working with professionals to enhance my marketing materials to accurately represent my company's philosophy. I'll also keep networking and attending seminars with life and business coaches."

INVEST IN STAFF

Thomas Walter, 62

Tasty Catering, Elk Grove Village

Corporate catering and event planning

2009 sales: \$6 million

"My top resolution is to ensure job security and personal and professional growth for my staff. We will accomplish this by offering staff more opportunities to meet with clients, investing in more staff training and providing more employee access to company advisers and consultants."

FRANCHISE IT

John Reh, 35

Dogs Love Running, Lisle

Dog exercise and pet-sitting service

2009 sales: \$75,000

"In 2010, we want to finish a blueprint for franchising and help five Chicago-area franchisees get started. We're currently writing up all our internal documents, videos and resources that franchisees will be able to access. After that, it's finalizing the legalities of being a franchiser. We'll promote the opportunity through lots of Internet pay-per-click ads and social media. We've already had four interested people contact us after finding our Web site, even though we're not advertising the franchises yet. That's encouraging."

SET GOALS WITH GUTS

Anna Maria Viti-Welch, 48

Guy Viti Insurance Agency, Highwood

Insurance and benefits agency

2009 sales: \$2.5 million

"I will hire an outside consultant to come in and evaluate our workflow, financials and individual employee performances. Then we will set structured and measurable goals for employees and departments, including sales goals, and we will follow up throughout the year and at the end of the year. We've tried to set goals in the past, but they were never very structured. This time we will be monitoring the process and progress."

ADD A PRODUCT

Catherine Tojaga, 41

CT Mechanical LLC, Wood Dale

HVAC contractor

HVAC contractor

2009 sales: \$2.5 million

"Right now we have only one product: furnishing heating, ventilation and air conditioning for commercial tenant projects. But what if the commercial tenant market takes a crash? We would be in very big trouble. So I'm attending an Anthony Robbins Business Mastery workshop this month in Las Vegas to help me determine why customers choose us, and then also identify and implement a second product."



Catherine Tojaga, with company superintendent Mike Stevenson, aims to diversify her product lineup. Photo: John R. Boehm

AUDIT, THEN DIET

Colleen Kramer, 43

Evergreen Supply Co., Chicago

Electrical supplier

2009 sales: \$15 million

"I'll be putting my business on a financial diet to more effectively compete in a soft market. We will form an advisory committee including inside and outside experts to audit each component of the business. With the audit and additional research, we will be able to identify our best processes as well as the ones that need strengthening. I anticipate that we'll make major changes in the way we organize inventory and that we'll begin stocking more eco-friendly lighting products."

MAKE A DON'T-DO LIST

Mary Bahr, 49

MAB Advertising Inc., Chicago

Advertising agency

2009 sales: \$2.2 million

"It's very easy to get caught up in the minutiae of the day and as a result spend all my time working in the business rather than on it. So I resolve to stop keeping a to-do list and instead become rigorous about a 'don't-do' list. I plan to implement it by asking myself, 'Is this something I have to do?' and, if not, delegate. Or, 'Will it make a positive impact on my bottom line?' and, if so, do it myself."

GO ONLINE TO STREAMLINE

Ursula Guyer, 41

WhiteChicago Inc., Chicago

Designer bridal consignment

2009 sales: \$600,000

"We need to understand social media, integrate it into our traditional media plan and figure out how to measure its return on investment. Social media is 'free,' but the resources to support it are not. Having just launched our e-commerce site, whiteXchange.com, our No. 1 strategy for 2010 is growing that part of our business. Combining the brick with the click will help generate a new revenue stream, elevate the brand to a national level and create efficiencies in-store through our online appointment-booking service."

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