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# VBR

**ValleyBusinessReport**

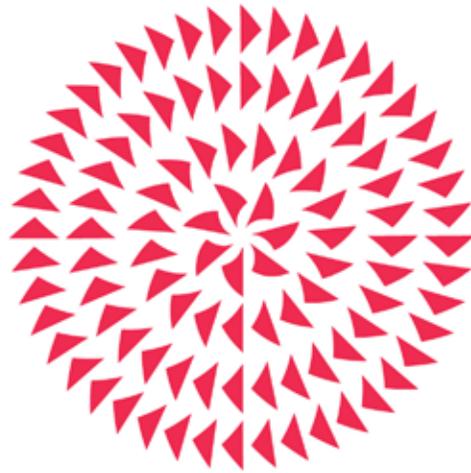
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# Professional Mentoring

When you have a business question, where do you go? Who advises you on the who, what, when, where and how much of your company or organization? What is the source of need-to-know, crucial information when it comes to running your business?

No matter how much we know, we don't know everything. So we lean on others for consulting, direction and feedback. Or do we? We often get so caught up in the day-to-day operations, wins and losses, we don't request help. Asking for help isn't a bad thing. It's actually a great thing because we all have friends, associates and contacts who can give qualified coaching at integral points of our business life.

Asking for professional assistance displays several things - development maturity and a willingness to admit we don't have all the answers - to name a few. When we call upon help from those who have seasoned similar storms, we are admitting we need mentoring. Again, this is a very successful trait.

Think about it, are you the oldest person you know who has led the type of business you currently own or manage? Chances are, no. Do you have persons you stay in contact with who

have retired from your profession, or someone who is operating a business or organization like yours in another market? When is the last time you contacted them to discuss ideas, share what works and what doesn't work, or asked for help and then executed a plan that was successful?

As parents, we encourage our children to participate in school internships, externships, tutoring and other types of shadowing/mentoring programs. Are we practicing what we instruct our kids to do? There's nothing wrong with reaching out to those we trust who have fought in the same rink, and ask "What did you do or what are you doing?" Learning from those who have battled the same situations and have come out on top are good sources of improving our current organization, departments and our individual management skills.

Sure, there are tons of sites to visit for tutorial programs. But there is something very practical about going to an older family member or a former or current leader in your field who you know, trust and can personally relate to when it comes to gathering advice and putting an improved system into action. We tend to get more sound, honest advice from a trusted confidant

than from an out-of-market, cookie-cutting consultant firm who may not have any personal experience with our industry.

When we lean on the successes of others, swallow a little pride admitting our way may not be the best, and put into action the pertinent, relevant and effective tips of those who have conquered the same monsters we face on a daily basis, our administrative and leadership skills improve. Just a phone call, email or personal visit saying, "I don't know - tell me, show me the way" could redefine our abilities and help take our organization to new horizons. There is a huge difference between "proud" and "pride." Differentiating between the two makes us stronger and better.

Todd Breland - General Manager  
Valley Business Report - VBR e-Brief  
(956) 310-8953  
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## Valley Business Report Staff

### *Editor*

Eileen Mattei

[eileen@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:eileen@valleybusinessreport.com)

### *General Manager*

Todd Breland

[todd@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:todd@valleybusinessreport.com)

### *Director of Operations*

Crystal S. Breland

[crystal@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:crystal@valleybusinessreport.com)

### *Production Art Director*

Beth Martinez

[beth@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:beth@valleybusinessreport.com)

### *Marketing Consultant - Upper Valley*

Katie Jones

[katie@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:katie@valleybusinessreport.com)

### *Editor, VBR e-Brief*

Angie Murray

[angie@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:angie@valleybusinessreport.com)

### *Web Design*

MPC Studios

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# From the Ground Up: Agriculture Business

By Eileen Mattei

Agriculture accounts for just over \$1 billion dollars of the Valley's economy, according to economists at Texas A&M AgriLife Research Center and Extension Service in Weslaco. That is about 2% of the four-county total of \$53 billion, but agriculture remains a vital and diversified industry which is the most widespread in terms of land use.

Agriculture is an industry where so many things are out of the producers' control, that farmers and ranchers are in effect gamblers on a scale grand enough to take your breath away. They either reap the benefits or plow under the bad luck, sometimes both in the same season.

Yet agriculture in 2015 is so far removed from a century ago -- or even 50 years ago -- when small farms dominated the Valley economy. Today Valley farmers and ranchers are intimately tied to global markets, shipping grain to China, cattle semen to Australia and gauging the impact of floods in India on the price of cotton and sugar. Far from static, the

Valley ag scene keeps changing: 20,000 acres are now planted in sesame seed.

You can grasp the continuing breadth of Valley agriculture by driving backroads past fields of cotton, cane, corn and cabbage. Agricultural support industries alone -- feed, seed, fertilizers, tractors and implements, truckers, crop dusters, processing, storage -- add \$187 million to the economy. Four products account for almost half of the region's ag income: grain (\$178 million), cattle (\$109 million), cotton (\$99 million) and sugarcane (\$52 million). VBR talked to business owners growing those crops.

## Harvest Time

Sam Sparks III watched a **SRS Farms'** field of corn being harvested north of Santa Rosa and explained why he chose to be the third generation of his family in agriculture. "I have such a passion for the business. It's my heritage. It's hard to walk away from something we're so rooted in. My family has invested and reinvested in the land and infrastructure. We've drilled wells and installed underground pipe lines to increase irrigation efficiency and productivity."

In addition, Sparks' family owns Progreso

International Bridge, which crosses more grain than any other Valley bridge. While traditionally much of the region's corn and sorghum were exported to Mexico, this year China is offering a grain premium, and South Texas produces the first northern hemisphere harvest. "It's a new avenue, selling to China," Sparks said. It reduces growers' cost too, since they don't have to pay storage waiting for Mexico to take the grain.

SRS Farms' food-grade white corn moved straight from the field to Azteca Milling in Edinburg, where it is tested thoroughly before being transformed into corn flour.

Webb Wallace, executive director of **LRGV Cotton & Grain Association**, explained that acreage shifts between crops based on global future prices and local weather. "Early this year, the (Valley) cotton forecast was down to 100,000 acres. Once we started getting significant rainfall, we couldn't get enough planted by the March 31 deadline." Only 60,000 acres of cotton went in this year versus 142,000 acres in 2014. The rain delayed planting of



A corn harvesting machine begins working another eight rows at SRS Farms. (VBR)

sorghum, which usually covers about 400,000 acres. Wallace confirmed much of that crop will be shipped to China at a good price.

The small farmer doesn't exist anymore, Wallace said, because of the cost of equipment. The average farmer has 1,000-2,000 acres of grain sorghum. And dryland farmers tend to have more land than irrigated farmers. Eleven cotton gins are still operating. Cotton production should be 2-4 bales per acre. Because of the rain, even Willacy dryland cotton will probably produce closer to two bales or more, he said, in comparison to 2014's 1.5 bales. "The main factor now is having good harvest weather."

Sam Simmons is a third-generation Cameron County farmer whose grandparents arrived in the Valley in 1923 and worked as sharecroppers. Simmons farms in partnership with his sons: 1,200 acres of sugar cane, 1,000 of cotton and 700 of sorghum. It was too wet to plant another 500 acres. His brother and nieces also farm. "Last year we planted more sugarcane because cane prices were a little more favorable. We still have not finished harvesting (last season's) sugar cane crop," because of rains. With next year's crop already growing, Simmons said sugar yields are down about 50%.

"This is the lowest price on cotton in a long time," Simmons added, and it is the

Sam Sparks III shows how much taller grain sorghum is this year due to heavy rains. Bigger heads mean greater yields. (VBR)



smallest cotton crop since 1983 because China has so much cotton in storage. He noted that in 1990, the U.S. exported 25% of the crop while 75% of today's cotton is destined for export.

Nevertheless, Simmons sees farming as a way of life. "It's an opportunity to be outside. You feel like you are the steward of the land to pass on to the next generations. For the most part, farmers and the farm community are about as optimistic and friendly a group as you're likely to meet. My livelihood is

based on the same crops as theirs."

**More Than One Basket**

"One thing U.S. farmers are good at is growing. Give us a seed and we will produce. But when it comes to marketing, we stand with our hands full of grain and ask how much will you give me?" said Mike England, who lives in a farmhouse north of Mercedes that had belonged to his wife Cricket's

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Because of spring rains, the Santa Rosa sugar mill was still processing just-cut sugar cane in mid-July. (VBR)

Cattle, corn, cotton, cane and grain account for almost a half billion dollars of the Valley's economy. (VBR)

Cricket and Mike England pose in front of his mobile office near a corn field being harvested. (VBR)



grandparents. The couple and son Benton operate **England Cattle Company**, which raises polled, registered Brahma cattle. “The market is good. With the drought ended, more ranchers are building up their herds.” And 500 straws of Brahma semen are ready to be shipped to customers in Australia.

Diversification is the norm ... and essential. England used to grow numerous vegetables but concentrates on onions. This spring, the weekend before his onions were harvested, a three-inch rain ruined the crop. “The best thing to do when you lose like that is to go in and plant something else right away. Out of sight, out of mind.”

On the other hand, the rain was beneficial. “This is first year we didn’t have to irrigate our corn, ever,” England. Standing next to a corn field being harvested, he acknowledged the importance of finding reliable businesses to work with. The grain was being trucked to **Garcia Grain** for storage and sale. “They’ve been a good asset to us farmers who produce grain.” His sorghum, too, will be trucked to Corpus Christi and put on a ship to China.

“We’re still ahead of the mid-80s when we were picking corn and cotton at the same time,” later in the year, England said. The farm operates with five full-time employees plus as many as 10 more seasonally.

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# Q&A with Tim Piller of ULA

Tim Piller has spent his entire career in aerospace. In 1984, with a degree in industrial technology from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, he joined Martin Marietta, which became Lockheed Martin and, in 2006, United Launch Alliance, the nation's premier space launch company. In the Valley since 2002, Piller was ULA's manager of production for the rocket builders until he was appointed ULA Site Lead last year.

*Tim Piller, ULA Site Lead Harlingen, points out the Harlingen-made payload fairing that encloses a satellite or research spacecraft. (VBR)*



**Q You and your crew make the Atlas four-meter diameter fairing which encloses the payload -- either satellites going into orbit or exploratory/research spacecraft headed for Mars, Pluto or the moon. Atlas rocket mechanical structures and adapter assemblies are fabricated here too. Have they all launched successfully?**

**A** Every one. We launched the Curiosity to Mars and the New Horizons spacecraft in 2006. It began sending back the first ever close-up photos of Pluto in July. We have launched weather, GPS and defense satellites and have scheduled a launch for the Mexican

government. We've sent rockets to crash into the moon to evaluate if water vapor is in the dust.

**Q United Launch Alliance and its predecessors have been in Harlingen for 27 years. You just renewed the lease on your Valley International Airport facility for five years. Was there any doubt it would stay in the Valley?**

**A** The aerospace business has become more competitive in the last years. ULA is always looking for opportunities to improve its operations. The City of Harlingen came up with incentives that made the business case for us to stay here instead of consolidating in Decatur, Ala. I don't expect to expand our physical facility here, but we have added a second shift and have been hiring to increase our capacity. Currently there are 162 employees, and the majority of them are rocket builders. This is the busiest we've been since I've been here.

**Q Why?**

**A** Because we are very reliable and the demand is there from

commercial and government agencies.

**Q Atlas rockets carried Gemini astronauts into space in the 1960s and are still launching. The rockets are 19 stories tall and carry payloads ranging from 6,000-40,000 pounds. Are they the Energizer bunny of American rockets?**

**A** The Atlas rocket is a real workhorse. Right now we launch 12-15 of our Atlas and Delta rockets every year. One of our rockets launched on July 15, carrying a GPS satellite for the Air Force. A second one went up a week later.

**Q Do you celebrate every time one of your rockets lifts off?**

**A** The facility stands down, and everyone is able to watch each lift-off live on closed circuit here.

**Q Who are your customers?**

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**A** The Department of Defense, NASA and commercial ventures.

**Q You were in Cape Canaveral in early July. As an observer?**

**A** I was visiting internal ULA customers assembling a payload. It's always good to check in and see if we are meeting their expectations. I'm happy to say they were pleased with our product.

**Q How long does it take for you to build a rocket?**

**A** It depends on the payload, but usually a rocket is a couple years in production. We're building rockets in the facility today that will fly in 2015 and to the middle of 2016. Missions are pretty specific; the date they want to launch seldom changes. Production is complex and requires interface control documents for harnesses and connections for avionics boxes, guidance, and flight control termination systems, propulsion and other systems. Half of what we build – the payload fairings -- goes directly to the launch site at Cape Canaveral or Vandenberg. The other half goes to our brother plant for assembly of the boosters.

**Q NASA has named two providers to take commercial crews to the ISS beginning in 2017. Will the Atlas be back in business carrying astronauts?**

**A** Yes it will. We are looking forward to supporting our partner Boeing in launching the CST-100 capsule to ISS.

**Q ULA's new generation launch system the Vulcan is due out in 2019. Blue Origin, owned by Jeff Bezos, is developing a rocket engine to end U.S. reliance on Russian-made engines, and it is destined for the Vulcan. Will Vulcan and Atlas production overlap?**

**A** The Vulcan will need to be certified to fly all missions, so there will be an overlap of production.

**Q What do you like best about being in the rocket building business?**

**A** It goes beyond the great scientific endeavors and enabling the world to use GPS and Internet via satellites. From my perspective, the most important and gratifying thing we do is help save our war fighters' lives. The satellites help them look around corners and over the horizon, and that mitigates loss of life. That's why mission success is so important.



*An image of Atlas V rocket launching dominates the ULA lobby. (VBR)*

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# Hunting Synergy

By Eileen Mattei

Hunting outfitter Adam Batot knew putting three unique but related businesses under one roof would benefit them all. As head of Double Shot Outfitters, he'd guided hunters in Texas and around the world: New Zealand, Canada, Colorado and Africa.

"When we'd get done with a hunt here, we'd go visit Trey Mitchell (of Mitchell's Wild Game Processing) and drop off the meat, and then go to Kevin Wick's (Buckshot Taxidermy Studio in San Benito)," he said. "It would take three hours to get home." Batot, who has a degree in wildlife from Texas Tech, decided to set up a one-stop shop under the name South Texas Headquarters. "It makes it convenient for hunters and for us."

When a client on an African hunt offered to invest in the enterprise last July, Batot already knew where he and business partner Cody Phillips wanted to locate the business. South Texas Headquarters opened on Highway 77 frontage north of Combes last November with three independent businesses cohabiting under one umbrella/storefront. "It was better to open late in the season than miss it,"

he pointed out. "We want you to be able to come here, grab your corn, ammo, ice and hunting license, and head out to the field." Hunters began to stop in on the way home with harvested game.

## The Meat

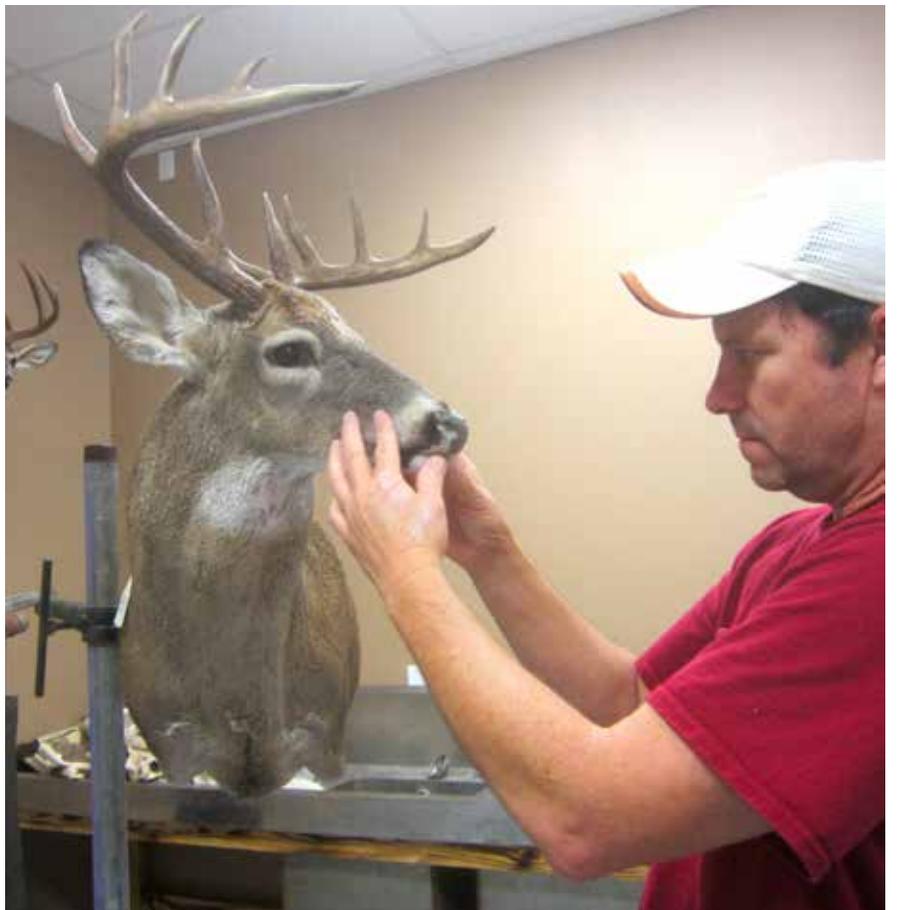
Trey Mitchell had been processing game for private ranches for 10 years, beginning when one of the hunters he was guiding asked him to take on the task. He added to his butchering machinery, knives, vacuum packer, coolers and employees when he moved into South Texas Headquarters. "I hadn't been chasing the larger market, but this has been the best year I've ever had. It was six days a week for at least five months. At any given time, we had 60 animals in the cooler." Mitchell would skin animals on weekends to have them ready for his crew. His is one of the few facilities that can handle wild hogs.

Mitchell processes deer, nilgai and various exotics, turning them into roasts, ground meat, steaks, patties and seven different kinds of sausages, from chorizo to bratwurst. He gives the processing invoice to STH which bills the customer.

*Taxidermist Kevin Wick fits a nilgai skin and horns to a polyurethane form, adding clay to fill it out. (VBR)*



*Kevin Wick checks a white-tailed deer mount he completed hours earlier. (VBR)*



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**The Trophy**

As Kevin Wick molded clay around the head of polyurethane foam form to make the tanned nilgai hide fit smoothly, he talked about being part of South Texas Headquarters. “These guys had been talking about opening this place for a few years. I had a pretty good idea that I would get some carryover from the processing end. People want convenience -- all in one place. It finally came together and has worked out well. It has definitely increased my customer base and work orders with the visibility -- people see my work on the wall -- and having the processing here.”

Wick himself had tanned the nilgai hide, which helps on the turnaround time for a taxidermy order. “I try to keep everything under a year, so they get their trophy back before they hit the stands the next season. A thin hide makes it flexible enough to pull on and for detail. I’m all about detail. I try to turn out a competition grade mount at a commercial price,” he said, stretching the skin of an animal that had weighed about 850 pounds onto the anatomically correct form.

Over the years, Wick has mounted a Spanish ibex, axis deer, black buck, fallow and red stags, gemsbok, zebra, lechwe, impala, a bear, birds and fish, along with Asian, African and American buffalo, and much more. Nevertheless, at least 80% of his work is white-tailed deer, either shoulder mounts or life size. “Every once in a while, we’ll have to do a specialty form,” he said, pointing at a javelina mount which is positioned twisting sideways. “There’s a lot more art to this than people think. The only thing fake is the eyes.”

Keeping a trophy cool and delivered to a taxidermist rapidly is essential to getting a good mount, according to Wick. “You got to treat it like meat you’d eat. Heat is the number one problem we have here. Once they get too hot, hair will start falling out. At that point, there’s nothing I can do to salvage the trophy.”

Wick is training an apprentice, but the surge of business has not allowed him to hunt and fish as he would like. “I haven’t been in forever, because who’s got the time? I have a gut feeling that next year will even be busier, even better.”

Batot himself was at his South Texas Headquarters desk this summer, instead of out in the field where he usually is ... and wants to be. That’s how it goes with a business that is successful in-house, online and in the field.

*For more information, see southtexasheadquarters.com.*

*South Texas Headquarters owner Adam Batot poses with a gemsbok taken in Africa. (Courtesy)*



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# Learning Curve

By Eileen Mattei

What employs about 300 certified teachers but is not a public or private school?

The answer is Sylvan Learning of the Rio Grande Valley, the local franchise that provides tutoring, supplemental learning, STEM education and college prep for K-12. In 2002, Executive Director Susan Valverde opened the region's first Sylvan center in McAllen with her business partners Tony Aguirre and Felipe Cavazos.

"The beauty of having a franchise is that it's a proven system and well resourced. The curriculum is consistently refreshed and updated," to meet new standards, said Valverde, who previously taught at UTPA. "I understand business, and this is a great business model, a recognized brand that's well-supported and has been around for 35 years."

Valverde said Sylvan Learning's CEO came to the Valley in July for the opening of the partners' Edinburg facility. July, in fact, marks Sylvan's peak season. "Valley enrollment triples in July. It's all hands on deck," Valverde said. "Parents are looking for things for the children to do or to catch up or to avoid leaning loss. It

sets up students for success."

As well as academic summer courses, summer camps, known as Sylvan Edge, immerse kids in STEM activities such as hands-on robotics and game design coding from June until late August.

Fall brings another batch of students needing academic support, particularly those struggling to make the transition from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school. Learning how to study can be as important as mastering a subject. Every student is first assessed, and an individualized lesson plan created. "They begin to feel successful and their confidence grows," she said.

Fall also marks the start of SAT and ACT preparation courses which are six weeks long and al-

ways full. "A lot of it is review. Part of it is endurance. Part is test taking strategies: when to guess, when not to," Valverde explained. "We cover the nuances, so they don't walk in cold. So much of their college future rides on how they do on the test."

Parents are the customers when individual students at Sylvan, but the other side of business is partnerships with school districts, cities and counties Valley-wide.

"One district hired us to do ACT prep for their kids. We also have contracts for robotics and engineering camps," Valverde said. The Mission EDC and Royal Technologies brought in Sylvan to expose and inspire 200 students



Mission students get introduced to Science, Technology, Engineering and Math during Summer Camp presented by Sylvan Learning and Mission EDC. (VBR)



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in a four-week STEM coding and engineering course. “We want to plant the seed that engineering is such a fun and viable career, especially in the Valley. Engineering involves so much technology. Kids love devices.” They learn to design, build and animate robots and Ferris wheels. “We hire students from UTPA’s School of Engineering (to teach the camp),” Valverde added. “It’s like a mentorship program: little girls meet women engineers.”

*Susan Valverde. (Courtesy)*



Sylvan’s partnership with Edinburg resulted in a new learning lab in the DHR complex. “We went to Edinburg CISD, South Texas ISD and Idea Public Schools and asked them what kind of support they needed. Where was a gap in their program and resources? They asked us to donate about \$30,000 in services, and they gave us a gorgeous, kid-friendly learning lab,” said Valverde. (Sylvan also pays rent.) “Edinburg wants to attract people who are good corporate citizens. We are happy to do this. We are part of this county; we are part of this community.” They have similar arrangement with some other districts and cities. “What I love about Sylvan and being in business in the Valley is we are very resourceful. We figure out how to make the most out of what we have. It makes sense to leverage resources.”

Valverde is also excited that more teachers are retiring. “I want them,” she said. “Our recruitment ads say it all: ‘Remember why you got into teaching.’ We have a positive learning environment. The kids are happy because they’re learning.” The instructors can choose their hours, don’t have tedious state reports to fill out and teach from 1-3 students at a time.

Currently Sylvan has centers in McAllen, Brownsville, Harlingen and Edinburg with satellite offices in Mission, Weslaco and Rio Grande City. “I’m really proud of what we have done and know there is so much to do. We want to serve more kids,” Valverde said. “We have to consider additional sites. It feels like the demand is there. So many exciting things are happening. I’m lucky to be able to do this and meet people who tell me stories about how education changed the trajectory of their lives.”

*For more information, see educate.com and enter your zip code.*

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# Sailing on the Southern Wave

By Eileen Mattei

An hour before passengers come on board the 48-foot sailing catamaran Southern Wave, Chef Diego is preparing green and red peppers and side dishes for fajitas under a canopy on the stern. Hostess Samantha is setting a table, while acoustic guitarist Terry McIntyre arranges his mike and amp. John Ferrone, owner of the South Padre Island business, stops by to check on the crew before the next stream of passengers flows onboard.

Once the Southern Wave's sunset dinner cruise passengers find seats up front around the sturdy netting connecting the twin hulls, Sam takes soda orders, casts off from the dock and hauls up the sail. Terry launches the entertainment with mellow versions of Jimmy Buffet and Willie Nelson songs, including "On the Boat Again" and "No Shoes, No Shirt, No Problems." He also plays jazz, tropical and light country.

Three couples are celebrating anniversaries: third, fourth and 44th. A mother, daughter and granddaughter trio from Illinois sit across from a Valley family. A breeze wafts the boat past the bayside condos and homes and brings the tantalizing aroma

of shrimp that Diego is grilling on the barbie. A few passengers take advantage of the BYOB policy and open a bottle of wine. After appetizers, the passengers enjoy picnic-style tacos of tender grilled beef and chicken and finish the meal with grilled fish and a fresh fruit platter.

The sun drops below the clouds to show off sunset colors. Passengers can feel like they are on a parade float, waving back at the kids and adults waving at them from island docks and yards. The two-hour cruises ends with the boat powering back to the dock as lights twinkle around the bay.

Cruise comments range from "mar-

velously mellow" and "romantic" to "the kids loved it."



During peak season, Memorial Day to Labor Day, Rhonda and John Ferrone's 47-passenger catamaran often makes four trips a day: snorkeling in the morning, an afternoon cruise, the sunset sail and finishes off with a moonlight or fireworks cruise. "In the afternoon, it's a snorkeling, swimming, sun tanning, lunch and lazing around three-hour cruise," said Rhonda. In fact, the 25-foot wide catamaran was custom built for day charters and snorkeling trips.

The couple started their business in 2006, based on John's lifelong involvement with boats: he grew up sailing in Vancouver and has sailed through the Panama Canal and the Caribbean. "He's always loved to sail. The Southern Wave goes out 364 days a year, weather permitting," said Rhonda. She observes island tourists come back year after year, as do Valley residents. "We absolutely have return customers; some of them come more than once a year."

At a kiosk with a dock, sandwiched between Louie's Backyard and Bob's on the Bay, Southern Wave Catamaran Charters sells individual tickets for most trips and also books private parties. "Local wedding planners call us. People can have their rehearsal dinner or wedding reception or any type of function on board," Rhonda added. "It depends on what

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kind of party people want to have: birthdays, office parties.”

With a packed summer schedule, the catamaran crew can call on a backup musician and hostess as needed. But guitarist McGuire explained, “This is not work for me. They let me perform.”

The fleet now includes an attractive, six-passenger sailboat, the Callipygous, which is available for day charters and comes staffed by a captain. Once the summer season is over, Captain John will sail the boat to the Caribbean and his family will meet him there. “I prefer to fly,” Rhonda admitted. But thousands of island visitors believe a three-hour or two-hour sail onboard the Southern Wave is the perfect way to relax and have fun.

*For more information, see sailspi.com*

*Who can take a sunset sail without capturing the memories? (VBR)*



*Chef Diego prepares dinner for passengers sailing past South Padre on the Southern Wave. (VBR)*



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# Protecting All Your Assets

By William Mainous

As new and innovative ideas are created globally in a digitally-connected society, intellectual property protection is fast becoming more important, if not essential. Competition from all corners of the business world is

rising. No one is immune from the theft of a ground-breaking concept or the misuse of an intellectual property.

For many businesses, especially small ones, resources are limited and should include the protection of intellectual assets. Pioneering ideas and processes, logos and trademarks, and business names all have a monetary impact on small business success, making it vital for owners to understand and practice the basics of intellectual property protection. In addition to these financial losses, brand confusion caused by fraudulent practices or copycats may also hinder the ability of a small business to preserve its brand authenticity and remain competitive in the global marketplace.



To begin, small businesses may have intellectual property protection in many forms. Examples of these protections include the following:

**Patents** are used to protect processes, designs, products and machines, among others.

**Copyrights** protect literary works; musicals, including any accompanying lyrics; dramatic works, including any associated music; pantomimes and choreographic works; pictorial, graphic and sculptural works; motion pictures and other audiovisual works; sound recordings; and architectural works, to name a few. In a small business, brochures, flyers, manuals, websites and handbooks may all be copyrighted.

**Trademarks** safeguard words, phrases, symbols, designs or combinations thereof that identify and distinguish the source of the goods or services.

**Trade secrets** protect devices or techniques used by businesses for its products or services. A prime example of a trade secret is a “secret recipe” used in a family-owned restaurant.

As imperative as it is for a small business to protect its intellectual property from infringement by outsiders, it is likewise important that small businesses respect the intellectual property of others. In the Rio Grande Valley, it is all too common to see “Looney Tunes” themed child daycare centers or an image of a celebrity on a hair salon window or sign, or a small restaurant playing copyrighted music. Large or small, all businesses should obtain permission to use copyrighted materials and credit their sources, in addition to paying any related fees and royalties, if applicable.

Although there is no intellectual property “police,” fines and lawsuits may be applied or filed for infringement and misuse of someone’s intellectual property. Hence, it is crucial that businesses take the time to understand how they may be liable. Small business owners are encouraged to speak with an attorney on intellectual property registrations and on how to safeguard themselves from potential litigation when using protected property. By staying vigilant and protecting their own intellectual property, small businesses can remain competitive in the global economy.

The UTPA Small Business Development Center held the 2015 Technology Ventures Conference on June 18, featuring speakers from the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Small business owners who have a commercial-ready product or service and wanted to learn more about protecting their intellectual property attended.

*William Mainous is a research assistant at the UTPA Small Business Development Center. He provides support for business development efforts by lending in-depth research assistance to clients of the center. For more information, call (956) 665-7535.*



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# The Bag King

By Eileen Mattei

Surrounded by mannequins, stylized hand models for jewelry, countless shopping bag samples and store showcases, Fred Kennedy surveyed the 16,000-square-foot warehouse that is the home of Kennedy Bag Impressions. The stocking distributor and wholesale importer has weathered major changes in the retail industry for almost 30 years and continues to thrive.

Kennedy came to the Valley in 1971 and helped Duro Bag in Brownsville grow to 325 employees and a production peak of 12 million bags per day. When he went out on his own in 1986, "the only thing I knew was bags," he recalled. He started Kennedy Bag Impressions, imprinting labels on plastic and paper bags for local stores, but soon faced reality. "In Brownsville, Texas, man cannot live by one item alone."

Kennedy turned his company into a one-stop shop for retailers by expanding into new and used store fixtures such as display racks and hangers, grids and showcases, as well as all sizes of mannequins. When stores closed down, he bought their fixtures and resold them to boutiques and flea market vendors.

Fred Kennedy (VBR)



Today his customers include golf shops and beach shops, boutiques, baby stores, antique shops,

high-end men's and women's clothing stores, resorts, jewelry shops, beauty suppliers and more. He provides imprinted zipper bags for suits and gowns, gift boxes, plastic-handled bags, and drawstring bags, along with bows and ribbons for gift wrapping purchases.

"I'm going to see that you get what you need," Kennedy said. "We take care of our customers really well, even when it means jumping through hoops." Because it can take up to three months for imprinted, imported bags and boxes to arrive, Kennedy Bag has set up alternative sources for use when turnaround time is critical.

Kennedy is in the perfect position to answer the question of plastic or paper bags in the Valley, where plastic by far had the lion's share of the market until recently. "It is really changing now with Brownsville and South Padre Island not using plastic. Many stores don't even offer the option of paper bags to their customers like most other locales do. Plastic is so much cheaper, about 10 times cheaper than paper," he said. "The big Brownsville supermarkets were spending about \$3,000-\$4,000 a week on plastic bags. Now they don't." This year plastic versus paper bag usage is running 50:50.

Kennedy is also in a position to assess a store's success. He has seen small stores grow and buy more bags (as many as 25,000 at a time) and upgraded fixtures. But over the years he has also witnessed hundreds of busi-

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ness close for one reason or another. When he sees a steady decline or a surge in bag and box purchases, he can make an educated guess at the future sales of a business.

The huge Brownsville warehouse on Ruben Torres Boulevard is divided into specialty rooms. One holds jewelry cases and hand mannequins, mirrors, earring racks and lighted displays. Several are devoted to mannequins from infant, child and maternity models to bra forms. Another room has organized shelves filled with seasonal and flower print wrapping papers, tissue papers in 50 colors and ribbons. "Sales of wrapping paper are half of what they were 20 years ago," he said. Large carpet display racks are going to an island store that is expanding, while clothing steamers will be used to freshen suits and gowns that arrive crumpled at retailers.

Kennedy recently expanded his company beyond bags and fixtures. He became affiliated with Cutter and Buck in Houston to supply imprinted corporate polo shirts and related items to banks, restaurants and retailers seeking a branded look.

Luis Ramos runs the Kennedy Bag Impressions warehouse, Kennedy said, while he himself makes sales calls and deliveries, checks the warehouse's nine security cameras via re-

*Mannequins of every size and gender fill rooms at Kennedy Bag Impressions. (VBR)*



mote access, and gets in a few rounds of golf. Golf bags are one of the few bags Kennedy doesn't handle professionally.

*For more information, call 831-0524 or see first-impressionspackaging.com.*



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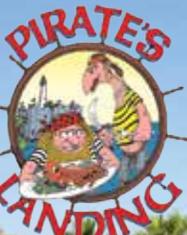
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# Family Focus Country Club

By Scarlet O'Rourke

Country clubs and kids are two things that traditionally do not go together, but that is an image the Harlingen Country Club intends to repaint.

For the past year, the HCC has been striving to make their environment more family friendly, an endeavor that has been well worth the effort, according to Chief Operating Officer Jeff Murray. The club has seen a surge with more than 60 new members in the past year as many families and younger members were added to the ranks.

The success is due to the club's family initiative put in place last year to endorse their primary purpose: "to be the best family focused privately owned club in the Valley," Murray said. In short, they wanted to promote a casual, fun and friendly place to live and grow. And nothing screams "life" louder than children.

What does that mean for the more mature residents and members of the club? Murray said that he and his staff have been working hard and seeing great success in providing for members of all ages. "It's about striking a balance. Honestly, the seniors like to see the

excitement."

"When I was growing up, I thought of the country club as being the place where my grandfather played golf and drank beer," Murray said. The scenario and the generations have definitely changed. HCC intends to not only ride the wave of family fun and innovation but to be at the peak of it. The club hosts almost daily activities for both the young and the not so young. Summer events range from swimming to culinary and nutrition classes for the adolescent members along with a number of sports and activities to keep them educated, healthy and entertained.

"We have chaperoned events for children. This is a component that gives parents a chance to enjoy club life," Murray said. Such instances give mature residents a chance to volunteer, bridging a gap from one generation to another and nurturing the community within the club. Though there are no events that require members to mingle with children, anyone who enjoys a family environment is encouraged to participate.

Families can now enjoy couple's cooking classes, pasta bars, movie nights, live bands and various sports. Outside speakers have included members of the local fire department who taught families about fire safety. Programs and events aim to make club living enjoyable for parents, young adults

A Harlingen Country Club family enjoys a day out golfing. (Courtesy)



and seniors.

Between spa days, a daddy/daughter dance and daily bridge games, the club creates fun and memorable experiences.

The changing market has brought more homemakers into the scope of the club's daily activities, Murray said. He is proud of the number of events geared towards women and mothers,

knowing they need some fun, too.

"It has been a very positive year," said Murray. HCC is hopeful that continued growth will enable their legacy to evolve.

For more info, call 412-4100.



Ladies Spa Day drew women to Harlingen Country Club. (Courtesy)




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# How to Avoid a Working Vacation

By Rosemary Couture

Vacations are a time to get away – far, far away mentally from your work. Yes, you love your business, your job. But do not turn your vacation into a working vacation by constantly checking for messages back at the ranch. If you seem hardwired to stay in touch with work, ask yourself why? Really? You haven't trained your people to handle routine and crisis situations? You don't trust them? You are convinced the business will fall apart without you micromanaging it?

The wonderful thing about a true vacation is that it takes you away from day-to-day routines, responsibilities and stress. Once your fingers have been pruned off your smart phone, you can start enjoying new sights, sounds and tastes. Vacations let you dive into out-of-the-ordinary experiences, stimulate your sense of adventure, appreciate your freedom and delight in surprises and new perspectives. You come home with treasured memories, renewed zest and, of course, countless photos.

If you need to justify a vacation to yourself, recall the studies that show vacations are good for your mental and physical health, in part because they reduce your exposure to stress hormones. Women who vacation regularly are 50% less likely to suffer a heart attack than women who don't. The number for men is 32% less, according to [takebackyourtime.org](http://takebackyourtime.org). Non-vacationers also tend to be more depressed and anxious.

Employees who take vacations have been shown to be more productive and have fewer sick days. One report noted that, "Liberal vacation policies create improved quality of life for employees, which translates into increased work quality. Workers also report feeling more creative after taking time off, and more than 70% of them reported feeling more satisfied with their jobs when they took regular vacations."

You can prepare to transition to a vacation mind-set. In the weeks before you depart, focus on projects with deadlines. Even if it means working extra hours to get everything under control or caught up, think of it as freeing yourself for your time-off.

When you are ready to go, set your email and phone for an out-of-office notice with contact information of a colleague who can cover for you.

At your destination, silence your ring

tones, vibrations and alerts when possible. Count on being able to sleep longer and on sharing experiences with people you love and strengthening your bonds with them.

Whether vacationing in the mountains, on

boulevards or beaches: don't worry; be happy. That is a major goal of a vacation -- to be happy. And when you do go back to work, you might have a new appreciation for the good things you have taken for granted at home.



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# In the Spotlight



Sylvan Learning held a ribbon cutting and partnership celebration between the Mission Boys and Girls Club, Sylvan Learning, Mission EDC and Royal Technologies to promote the “Code the Town” and “Engenuity” initiatives where students will have the opportunity to learn concepts used in the STEM professions, and work in a fun and hands-on environment to build projects as well as to enrich their computer science skills in a series of free summer camps. (VBR)



Doug Dorsey, Bartlett Cocke’s senior project manager for the \$35 million UTRGV academic building slated for Brownsville, provided information to a standing-room-only crowd of more than 150 construction sub-contractors at Associated General Contractors in mid-July. (VBR)

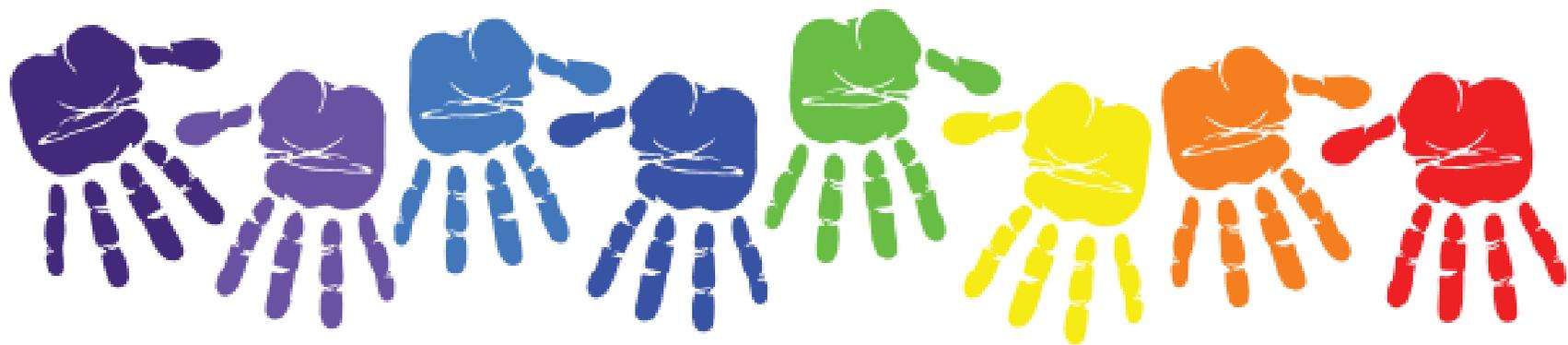


Cardenas Ford celebrated the grand opening of their new dealership in Raymondville. (VBR)



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