



International Commodity Distributors, Inc.

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Entrepreneur Positions her Business for Long-Term Growth

The SBDC helped this local business owner restructure her fruit and nut distribution company

International Commodity Distributors (DBA Davis Lewis Orchards) has supplied healthy fruit and nut snacks to consumers via grocery stores and specialty markets nationwide for over 25 years.

Challenges

Founder Roberta Davis-Lewis was a single mom raising two kids in 1990 when a friend convinced her she could start a business selling almonds from her 42 acres of almond trees in California's Central Valley. Roberta took her friend's advice, harvested the almonds and drove to Southern California seeking buyers. Before she knew it, Roberta began selling not only her goods, but also those of other local farmers. As business continued to grow, Roberta sought the assistance of experienced business professionals at the SBDC hosted by the University of La Verne for further guidance.

Best Advice

SBDC Business Advisor Malcolm Geffen helped Davis-Lewis restructure her business, put new financial controls in place, obtain a new loan to consolidate debt, establish HR policies and plan for projected growth.



INDUSTRY

Fruit and Nut Farming

CHALLENGES

- Financial Management
- HR
- Financing
- Growth Planning

SOLUTIONS

- Financial projection and statement preparation
- Personnel policy creation and implementation
- Organizational structure creation
- Debt consolidation and equipment loan

CLIENT IMPACT

- Obtained \$900,000 SBA loan
- Created two new jobs
- Revenue growth of 20% expected in 2016

“Business today is the strongest it’s ever been,” says Davis-Lewis. “If it wasn’t for all [the help from the SBDC], I would not be here.” “I would highly recommend the services of the University of La Verne SBDC program to any business looking to grow or expand.”

–Roberta Davis-Lewis, Founder, International Commodity Distributors, Inc.



Manage Your Money

Davis-Lewis had marketing and sales experience, but admitted, “I did not know how to run a business in terms of finances.” The first step Geffen took was helping her understand the company’s finances. Today, she says, “My finances are stellar! My accounting, bookkeeping and record-keeping are organized and clean.”

Beyond basic bookkeeping, Geffen also showed Lewis how to budget, project, and estimate costs. “These are tools I now use every week to determine the value of my company,” she says. In addition, Geffen helped her categorize its core clientele of 56 stores into seven categories and weigh the value of each client within their category. “We graph all of this and once a month, we review what we’re doing,” says Davis-Lewis. “We have a game plan now.”

Create Systems

Although Davis Lewis Orchards has a full-time staff of 20 to 25 and about the same number of seasonal employees, Davis-Lewis was still managing her employees without policies or a formal structure. “I never had an organizational chart,” Davis-Lewis explains. “I was running the company by names, not by positions — ‘Oh, Marissa does that.’” Rather than letting jobs evolve ad hoc based on employees’ skills, Geffen showed her how to define each position and put procedures in place so each employee understands his or her role in the team. “That stopped a lot of confusion and finger-pointing,” Davis-Lewis says. “I didn’t have people stepping on each other’s toes anymore.”

Plan for Expansion

By mid-2015, Davis-Lewis was ready to seek financing for a new packaging machine. She met with Geffen, who reviewed her financials and helped her assess funding options. Geffen advised her on how to restructure her existing loans into one SBA loan and obtain \$900,000 to purchase a new form and fill machine.

“The new machine is faster and less likely to break down,” Davis-Lewis explains. She expects the new machine to increase production from 5 million bags a year to between 6.2 million and 7.2 million. To handle the projected growth, she has hired a new director of operations and a new national sales manager.

Get Support

Perhaps the biggest transformation the SBDC brought about is the new confidence Davis-Lewis feels. That confidence translated to Davis-Lewis’ relationship with her employees. “My team now has more belief in me that I know what I’m doing and know how to run a business. Before, they did not – and I did not,” she admits. “It was hard to see myself as a [business] owner, with all the responsibilities that came with that. Malcolm helped me turn my team around to respect me as a leader. I brought him in for them to meet and talk with him. Because they had confidence in Malcolm, they [supported] me.”

Client Impact

Davis-Lewis will be adding a new line expected in national chains and will expand its private-label program to target boutique chains across the United States. Davis-Lewis projects revenue growth of 20 to 30 percent in the coming year, and by the second quarter of 2016, expects to have enough business to support hiring a second shift of employees. Her ultimate vision is to “own” the natural and organic category for fruit and nut snacks.

