

# WHAT I WISH I KNEW WHEN I STARTED MY FIRE BUSINESS

Collected Thoughts  
Of Successful Fire  
Business People



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## **NOW WHAT DO I DO?**

**For every new fire business, there are the obvious questions to answer. Who are my customers? Where can I find the money I need to get started? What products or services am I going to offer?**

**And for nonprofits, many of the questions are the same, but with a twist. How do I demonstrate my nonprofit's ability to continue finding funding to sustain it? How much 'pro bono' help can I get from people's good will? How do I get our name out there so that potential donors will honor and renew their pledges to keep us running?**

**But in addition to these basic questions, there are many that you won't even think of until you are well down the road in your business. Probably after you've run into a wall. Wouldn't it be nice to have someone who has been successful in your chosen profession impart some useful advice that could save you a lot of grief?**

**Having started both for-profit and non-profit businesses, I'm acutely aware of these questions and the different answers that arise. This report queries some people who have made a successful career in a fire business or nonprofit. These folks share their hard-earned wisdom in the following pages. Hopefully it will help to make a success of your fire business or nonprofit as well!**

## **DAVID CANT – BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT MANAGER – BLAZETAMER 380**

David Cant knows the fire business in Australia from both sides of the equation. Having served as the Aviation Services Manager for South Australia's Country Fire Service for a number of years, he got to see what it takes to run a state-wide fire aviation operation. And now that he has moved into the private sector as the Business Development Manager at [BlazeTamer380](#), he has added to his considerable knowledge of fire operations by learning a few more things about working with customers of a fire business. Of all the things he has learned, he distills down the most important aspects in the following statements.

“To succeed in this business, you have to fully understand the client for your product”, he began.

“You have to know what their procurement practices are, first and foremost”, he explained.

“You have to determine the likelihood that they are even interested in purchasing your product”, he added.

“The issues that might derail a purchase by your customer is also a concern”.

“And you have to provide clear pathways for them so that when they use your product, it doesn't create further issues for them to resolve”, he concluded.

***In other words, always remember that the customer is king (or queen) and that if they have to resolve the problems your product or service causes them, they may not stay your customer for long.***

## **RICH SAUER – OWNER – WILDFIRE COACH**

Rich Sauer is in the unique position of being a Fire Captain with Ventura County Fire Department and, in his off time, running a fire business, [Wildfire Coach](#), which aims to help homeowners living in the wildland interface prepare themselves in the event of a wildfire that poses a potential threat to their home and assets. As such, he provides a service, rather than a product, which has value to homeowners, whether as individuals or as communities. And as an active-duty firefighter, he has the ability to ‘size-up’ a home or community to decide how best to prepare it to survive a wildfire, whether it be more defensible space, improvements to harden structures against wildfires, or other changes that will allow the homes in a community to have a reasonable chance of surviving a wildfire. His thoughts on how best to operate a fire business?

“The one thing to prepare for in a fire business is that it can be tough to get your message across to the general public”, he began.

Perception can also be a problem with your clients. “In my experience/situation, emotions pollute the reality.”

“People are complacent when it comes to disaster planning”, he explained.

“The general feeling is that it won’t happen to me, so therefore, I don’t need a plan or a product to protect my life or my property.”

“This has been the most difficult problem for me to overcome so far.”

***You may have what you consider to be the best product or service available in the industry, but if you can’t convince your potential clientele of your worth, you’re going to have a hard time getting them to answer your call to action, whether buying something, making a donation to your nonprofit, or trusting that your service is really necessary.***

## **GERRY GEISLER – GENERAL MANAGER – ECO FIRE SOLUTIONS**

Jerry Geissler has worked on both sides of the fence, first as a career firefighter working up to the Assistant Deputy Director of the [California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection](#) (CAL FIRE) and now as General Manager of [Eco Fire Solutions](#). With over 35 years of experience in fire protection, he knows what works and what doesn't work in the fire arena. Here are his thoughts on what new fire business owners have to do to succeed.

“The most important thing is to know your customers and know your competition”, Jerry stated.

“The fire service has long been characterized as something that is resistant to change. And that has been to their detriment.”

“If you are going to succeed in the fire protection business, you are going to have to look at yourself and your mission, and understand that may not be the same mission that everyone else has. There are other agencies with different missions, different sets of values and different approaches. The different agencies can successfully work together but it takes a clear knowledge of the differences to understand the paths to productive cooperation.”

“If you are going to work with land management agencies, you are going to have to understand how they think. You also need to understand why they exist, their history, how they're organized, what their mission is, and what their employer's expectations are. If you don't, you'll end up wondering ‘Why don't they do it like we do it? They must be wrong.’”

“The Forest Service's fire operations of tomorrow will probably be much different than they are today. They are going to be looking for innovative ways to get things done because the ways things are being done today is simply not affordable and the losses aren't acceptable.”

“There will be increased public scrutiny of the wildland fire agencies if for no other reason than wildland fire suppression costs are growing to be a significant percentage of government spending. In the past, the fire services largely operated with very limited accountability because if a fire got away, it just burned the countryside and nobody asked if that had to happen. That will change because of increasing financial pressure and an unavoidable negative public reaction to growing resource and property loss.”

“For someone from the private sector, know your customer, don't assume that just because someone wears collar brass that firefighter sees the world in the same way as another firefighter wearing collar brass does.”

“You need to understand the culture of the agencies you're dealing with, understand their challenges and what's important to them and their employers and being able to help them meet those kinds of challenges.”

***To sum it up, then, thoroughly research your intended customer or cooperator to understand their organization, goals and objectives, and, as much as possible, the culture that drives it.***

## **RICK HATTON – CEO – 10 TANKER AIR CARRIER**

Rick Hatton, a former Marine fighter pilot, knows what it's like to navigate a fire-related business through the political and institutional shoals that await any new fire business or nonprofit. His [10 Tanker Air Carrier](#) has had its share of ups and downs, winning and losing contracts at both the state and federal level. With a Next Generation air-tanker contract from US Forest Service under his belt now, he has plans to expand the business of bringing the largest air-tankers in the world into the fight against wildfires. This is what he had to say about thriving in the fire business.

“You have to act with absolute integrity”, Rick began.

“Unlike business to business, you're dealing with government entities (federal, state, provincial) and you won't have that many who want your product”, he explained.

“As a fire business, especially start-ups, you won't have unlimited funds for Public Relations, and even if 10 Tanker ran an ad in the New York Times, 10 out of 10 people reading it wouldn't care.”

“Don't make *any* enemies, ever! Because most of the people you're dealing with, even though they look to be non-decision makers, they do ultimately make things happen.”

“There's a tremendous amount of misinformation within some of these large bureaucracies that can cause a good idea to never get adopted.”

“You need to use the ‘seven touches’ sales method where you develop a relationship before trying to sell something.”

“You have to have a good product.”

“You have to have patience.”

“You have to watch your budget. Don't blow it all when you have a lot of potential income on paper.”

“Don't bad-mouth your competitors.”

And adopt a mantra that's easy to remember, like 10 Tanker has: “MORE, SOONER, SAFER, CHEAPER. It's not complicated.”

***To summarize, provide a first-class product or service and, above all else, patience, integrity and professionalism will take you far in the fire business.***

## **DAN SNYDER – CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER – NEPTUNE AVIATION**

Dan Snyder has been in the aerial firefighting business for many years and has seen the US heavy air-tanker fleet dwindle from 44 aircraft in 2002 to only a handful today. But at the same time, [Neptune Aviation](#) has also begun transitioning from their Korea-war-era P-2V air-tankers to the newer, jet-powered BAe 146 aircraft. He took time out from a busy schedule to discuss what he feels is of paramount importance to start-up fire businesses.

“Partner with an organization that has corporate knowledge of the process”, was Dan’s first recommendation.

“Aerial firefighting and firefighting in general is very historically based. There’s a lot of corporate knowledge and people who have done this for decades, and they have a lot of knowledge locked in their heads that you cannot put on paper. And there’s a symbiotic relationship because a lot of people get into the agencies from the industry, and a lot of people who get into industry after working in the agencies.”

“The business is very relationship-based”, he continued, and he recommended getting someone who is a seasoned veteran in the business to directly advise you on each step you take early on.

“The US Forest Service was built from its very beginning to be a fragmented organization. You have all the different 9 regions which each have their own regional forester and deal with things differently because of the geographic resources or obstacles [each region faces]. They had to build it that way and it’s worked that way for over 100 years. But on the flip side, firefighting is the one area where USFS has tried to remain consistent. And this is why it’s difficult to deal with USFS and it’s not in any book out there.”

“As a fire aviation business, which we are, what’s industry acceptable from an aviation standpoint may not be acceptable to a fire agency that is also an aviation agency [like USFS].”

“If you come in with a superior product, a high-quality professional operation, that’s a recipe for success. But always remember that if you’re dealing with a federal agency, they look at things a little differently from what the commercial sector does.”

“Relationships are extremely important. Establishing relations with Boise [NIFC] which is the main fire aviation and ground operations hub for the Western US, and also establishing relations with Washington DC are both going to be very important.”

“Flexibility and reaction are extremely important when dealing with a sole-source customer with a special-purpose aircraft.”

***To summarize, relationships can bring you the unwritten knowledge you need to succeed and flexibility can carry you through the crises that arise as wildfires break out everywhere.***

## **ED KLEIMAN – CORPORATE WILDLAND OPERATIONS COORDINATOR - GELTECH SOLUTIONS, INC**

Ed Kleiman spent many years learning the ropes at US Forest Service and has used some of that knowledge to succeed as the Corporate Wildland Operations Coordinator at Florida-based [GelTech Solutions](#), maker of FireIce gel firefighting products. Crisscrossing the country when fire season is at its height, he personifies the fire business guy who knows how to get the job done even with the pressure of multiple fires. As a result, his thoughts on what can make or break a fire business are instructive.

“Doing business with the government, you may be dealing with one agency through another one. For instance, you may be dealing with the Department of the Interior as the lead agency, but your customer may actually be US Forest Service”, Ed explained. “It can be really confusing and really convoluted.”

“If you’re a start-up business, the smaller the agency, the easier it is to deal with it. Aim for city or county fire agencies, for instance, before trying to work with US Forest Service.”

“If you’re working in an inter-agency environment, know who your true customers are. There may be people responsible for the agreement, other people responsible for the testing, and still other people for the approval, so you don’t want to lose track of who your actual customer is.”

“In these larger agencies, job descriptions are pretty narrowly defined, so you may end up talking to 15 people whereas in private industry you would only have to talk to two.”

“One example of this would be where you’re dealing with NIFC (National Interagency Fire Center) in Boise and also trying to deal with agency folks in Washington DC. The policy may be made in DC, but the decisions are made at NIFC and there may not be a lot of coordination between the two, even though it’s the same organization.”

“If you’re selling a particular kind of product, say powdered gel, the job has to go out for solicitation, so you may be competing with several other powdered gel products on that solicitation. What happens then is that your company thinks it is getting the sale, but it winds up going to one of your competitors!”

“One of the most important things you can do in the business is go out and find a champion in each agency you want to work with. Every large, successful company in this business has someone who is a friend, buddy, whatever, who works in the target agency.”

“People are always complaining that everybody at the agency loved their product, but they can’t get a sale. It’s because they don’t have a champion.”

***So if you want to succeed, start cultivating champions at your target agencies today!***



## **KATE DARGAN – PRESIDENT – INTTERRA, INC.**

As California's Fire Marshal, Kate Dargan interacted with many fire businesses. When she launched her own business, [Intterra Inc](#), she ventured into the competitive fire business herself with a leading-edge GIS product line which has seen frontline use in Colorado's wildfires, being employed to brief the Governor during the Black Forest Fire. Having worked both sides of the fence as a fire commander and as a fire businessperson, she has valuable insights into what it takes to excel in the industry.

“The fire service is very much a word-of-mouth culture, so you have to understand that most fire departments do not pick items off of shelves, from catalogs, or from vendor booths at conferences. They choose products because they've seen them used by someone else and see how they might apply to them.”

“Finding champions in a department/agency who believe in your product is gold.”

“This is not a commodities industry, it's more of a relational industry [between members of the fire service], so you have to be more focused on your customer, identifying their problems, understanding the potential solutions, and how [your product or service] will work for them.”

“From a business model perspective, you might offer a very finite, focused, defined product which would allow you to mass-market it, hereagain, through this relational market.”

“If your product is brand new, something never seen before, then you have to begin by marketing it to a few core customers who are influence leaders and impress the heck out of those customers.”

And although high-tech products are sought out by consumers, the fire service is different. “Our barrier to market is customer understanding of its capabilities, not the technology or the cost.”

“When you're introducing into the fire service something that is unfamiliar, you need a relationship first to boost credibility because it is not an innovative industry.”

“To lead them into accepting your idea, they have to have a lot of faith that your vision will fit their need.”

“It requires some commitment on those customers' parts to experiment with things that not everyone else is doing.”

“As a culture [the fire service] is not focused on research and development and is not a failure-tolerant organization. When you roll something out, it's expected to succeed.”

***Kate's overview? “For any company trying to break into the fire service, build customers a few at a time and figure it will take about five years to take hold.”***

## **DARREL KENOPS – CEO – NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF USFS RETIREES**

Darrel Kenops has 40+ years of forestry, natural resources and fire management experience, including stints as Forest Supervisor of several western National Forests for US Forest Service, before becoming CEO/Executive Director of the [National Association of Forest Service Retirees](#) in December 2006. The nonprofit he now leads keeps USFS retirees connected, helping them to provide wisdom gained over the years. They provide non-partisan, independent insights, advice, education and recognize quality stewardship. He shares some of that collective wisdom below.

“The first thing is to understand the mission, business practices of those federal, tribal, state and local entities you seek to work with, offer a service to.”

“Another element is to examine the geographical scale at which you wish to offer your services. Is it national, international, regional and/or local?”

“Still another segmentation is, do you seek to offer services for the fire pre-season, during an active wildfire season and/or in a post-fire season rehabilitation and restoration services and support roles?”

“Finally establishing professional relationships is key. An example is participating in [Society of American Foresters](#) (SAF) and other related organizations that help you understand services now available and discover where there may be gaps to be served.”

“SAF's [Forestry Source newspaper](#) and other newsletters keep you up on the issues, helps you to be conversant on current issues, conversations and challenges.”

***And one big take away? "Under promise and over deliver on your product or service provided."***

## **CHUCK BUSHEY – PRESIDENT – MONTANA PRESCRIBED FIRE SERVICES, INC**

Chuck Bushey has won his spurs in both the fire business and the fire nonprofit worlds. As the recent past-President of the [International Association of Wildland Fire](#), he oversaw an organization that supports many studies and conferences dealing with wildland fire. As President of the Montana Prescribed Fire Services Inc, he's been working to help return fire to the landscape for management purposes and reduce the fire danger to communities since 1985.

“Gain business experience before jumping in with both feet, because if you don't, you'll probably be out of business within a year or two”, Chuck advised.

“I know people right now who are looking to retire from the agencies to start their own consulting business, and I say ‘That's great, but do you know how to run a business?’”

“I tell them ‘If you have questions, by all means ask someone, and get an answer before committing your hard earned finances to a new business.’”

“You may have a great product, great expertise, but if you can't navigate the business aspect of it, you won't last.”

“I see a lot of people who have seemingly a great idea, believing they have the best product in the world, but they don't seem to do much in the way of market research.”

“I always tell folks ‘This has got to be one of the most conservative industries in the world, and unless you've got really deep pockets, getting a new product out there could take years. But some companies are finding profitable niches. Market research on this goes a long way.’”

One cautionary tale stands out. “In recent years there were companies that tried developing respirators for wildland firefighters, but the product idea never gained traction in the wildland firefighter community. My suggestion is if your product isn't immediately successful don't lose hope, look at changing your marketing strategy. Wildland smoke, as an example, can seriously impact a lot of people beyond the wildland firefighting community so be looking for alternative sales markets. Always try to look at the larger picture for your product or service.”

But if that happens to you, don't lose hope. “Change your marketing strategy. Smoke is bad for a lot of people, so market it to the public.”

Another fact to keep in mind. “Just because a private company does the research and product development doesn't mean that the agencies responsible for wildland fire will accept it. But if an agency can help research and develop a concept they are more willing to accept the product.”

And there use to be, and I suspect it still exists, a program within the US Forest Service for doing just that. “If you have a new product or a new idea, they will provide you with grant money to do the experimentation and develop the product.” With a catch... “Of course, the government now owns a percentage of that, and some companies don't like that because they want to gain all the benefits out of it.”

## WAYNE COULSON – CEO – COULSON GROUP

Wayne Coulson's [Coulson Group of Companies](#) has had a hand in the fire business for many years. As owner of the legendary Martin Mars flying boats, his company has fought fires in Canada, the US, and Mexico. He also introduced the high-tech Firewatch 76 helicopter which is "the only aircraft in the world that can analyze drop effectiveness in a timely fashion", and his new C-130Q just began operations as a 'Next Generation' air-tanker with US Forest Service. Although he's having success now, it hasn't always been an easy road. Here is what he has to say about contracting with US Forest Service.

"The [aerial firefighting] industry has a long way to go to get the firefighters on the ground what they want in a safe fashion."

So how do you get your message across to giant federal land agencies? "What we did was that we spent the money on scientific research ourselves and went in there and presented those facts."

"What's worked for us was to spend our own money, do our own research and development, hired a third party to verify the results, and then we just start knocking on doors."

"As generally holds true in business, you can't dispute facts."

"And one thing that holds true about the fire business is that it is the most opinionated business I've ever seen."

"Beginning with the Mars, we said we would measure ourselves to be the best we could be for them, and we would share that information with them at no cost and they could do whatever they wanted with that information."

"It has to be a better black box, and if [a company] can find support through third parties to endorse it, that will go a long way."

"There's a Canadian wildfire research firm, FP Innovations Wildland Fire Operations Research Group out of Alberta, that we've used to evaluate the Mars, structure protection with gels, etc."

"So everyone has to figure out a way to get their product known through research and the third party endorsement that people [ie, fire agencies] will be comfortable with."

And insofar as what to avoid doing? "Don't go to the media to try to win your battles through the court of public opinion. You're just not going to win with that."

***To summarize, getting a respected third party opinion of your product, service or study is probably your best option!***