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REALITY CHECK

Does Your Small Business Suffer from Owner Neglect?

BY CAROL TICE | Yesterday | 1

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When times get rough at your small business, do you dive in and tackle the problems head-on? Or, are you more likely to stand back and hope for the best?

On a recent episode of Spike TV's *Bar Rescue*, restaurant expert Jon Taffer finds himself at Champs, an aging sports bar sited near the movie studios in Burbank, Calif. The bar has been going downhill for years.

The decor inside and out are "right out of the 1970s," as Taffer says, with goofy megaphones tacked to the outside walls and diagonal strips of wood trim. Worse, owners Joe and Helen Handy have delegated the job of ramping up sales to a bevy of buxom barmaids who are rude -- and over-serving liquor to the tune of \$1,600 a week.

And Joe sits in the back drinking a beer and watching it happen. It's a chronic case of owner neglect -- as problems mount, the owner is overwhelmed and withdraws.

Champs is for Chumps

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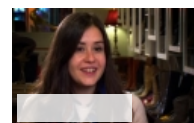
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What can you do when you've checked out and allowed your business problems to multiply? Here is Taffer's prescription for a turnaround:

- **Start with the worst thing.** Start with the worst thing. The biggest money-waster at Champs is over-pouring and giving away liquor. So the first step is to retrain bartenders to pour only the liquor that's meant to be in each drink. Top mixologist Tobin Ellis even teaches a few tricks for making it look like you're pouring more when really, it's just the same amount.
- **Own up, you're the problem.** Lack of leadership rubs off on your employees and leads them into apathy, too. "Businesses that aren't cared for fail," says Taffer.
- **Don't say "I can't."** At one point the bar runs out of Heineken, one of its most popular beers. But Joe insists it's too difficult to change the keg in the middle of a busy night. Taffer teams up with the cook and gets it done in three minutes flat.
- **Maximize your space.** Reorganizing where glasses, ice and beer taps are enable bartenders to serve faster and make more sales. Ditto for the kitchen, which improved its prep setup so that more ingredients are closer to hand. Out in the seating area, a new ceiling-high kiosk of televisions provides a focal point and adds excitement.
- **Study the winners.** Taffer takes the Handys to one of the most successful bars in the area, Barney's Beanery, to show them how an older bar can become classic rather than dated. Key takeaway here: Barney's is famed for its wide variety of beers and 35 kinds of burgers. "If you're known for something, you can last forever," Taffer notes.
- **Tweak your concept.** From a vague sports-bar idea, Taffer transforms Champs into the bar that offers the excitement of the ballpark. The menu boasts the best dishes from the ballpark, including Dodger dogs and garlic fries. Instead of random punk outfits, staff now sport snappy referee uniforms. So it's still about sports, but now it's more fun.
- **Upgrade your technology.** To update the concept, Taffer introduces a video trivia game that is played on handheld devices that post results on the TV screens above. When it's time to play, Joe gets on a megaphone and makes announcements. This gimmick helps T.G.I. Friday's fill seats at happy hour and gets patrons to order more drinks and stick around.
- **Work nonstop.** When a business is in trouble, you can't do a little here and there. It's going to require a 110 percent of your effort for a while to get things back on track. "I have to teach Joe to work all night, not in five minute spurts," Taffer says.

How have you overcome feeling apathetic about your business's problems? Leave a comment and let us know.

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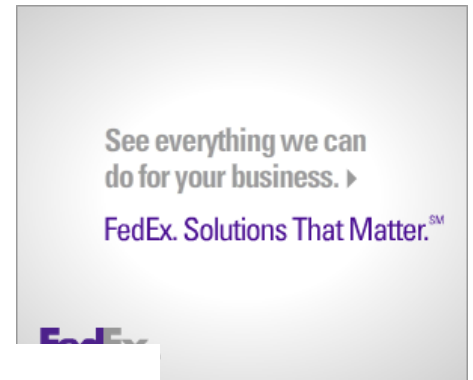
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Qhannasr 6 hours ago

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