

PROVIDENCE BUSINESS NEWS

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NEWSMAKERS

Downturn training ground for tomorrow's top businesses

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Chris Sanford traveled the world while serving in the U.S. Navy. He saw amazing places and lived in far warmer climes than the Ocean State. But when he decided to launch a business, Sanford chose Rhode Island, his home state.

Sanford launched a PuroClean franchise in 2007 out of his house with himself as the only employee. He has quickly built the disaster-response business, which now boasts a 4,000-square-foot facility in Warwick and seven other employees. For his successes, the Central Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce named Sanford Young Entrepreneur of the Year.

Sanford recently spoke with Providence Business News about his business and the challenges of being an entrepreneur.

PBN: Can you talk a little about your decision to start PuroClean and why in Rhode Island?

SANFORD: I started the business in the fall of 2007. Obviously, I didn't know the economy would be turning a year later. But I was active duty in the Navy and trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I'd grown up in Rhode Island and was lucky enough to spend the last two years on active duty in Newport and also worked on my MBA at night at the University of Rhode Island.

My initial thought was to go get plugged in at a large Fortune 500 company. ... But the more I learned, to advance and succeed in those companies you really need to move and travel. ... So taking the MBA foundation, I then started to look at purchasing an existing business and I didn't know a whole lot about that. But then I learned about the franchise opportunities and came across PuroClean.

I like franchising because they



PHOTO COURTESY PUROCLEAN

THROUGH THE STORM: Chris Sanford, owner of PuroClean, said that surviving during a recession helps businesses thrive when the economy turns around.

give you a system. They give you a roadmap to success and it really increases your odds rather than starting something from scratch with a high rate of failure. You can learn from other successful franchises in different cities and states and the franchisor is also there to give you some guidance along the way.

I came across PuroClean and what I liked about the business is that on a daily basis we're out there to help people out. When people have had fires and had floods, they really need a helping hand and they need somebody to get them back on their feet and back into their homes and their businesses up and running as quickly as possible.

It's something that I also had some experience with in the Navy. I was trained in damage control and did have experience in restoring after fire and floods, just on a different scale. ...

So I started the business. It's been a long road and a challenge.

People I think often underestimate the amount of sweat equity ... the entrepreneur has to put in.

PBN: So why stick with it? Why not go work for a major, established company?

SANFORD: There have been some late nights and that thought has crossed my mind but I think, in the long run it's my business. The results - good or bad - are the result of my and my employees' efforts and that's pretty rewarding. I think personally and financially, long term the gains will be better on my own.

PBN: Why open in Rhode Island, which has a reputation for a difficult place to start a company?

SANFORD: For me, getting back to where I grew up and getting closer to my parents, family and friends was very important. I think there were certainly some challenges at the beginning.

Getting help, getting answers from the R.I. Division of Taxation or the R.I. Department of Labor [and Training] was sometimes quite a challenge, just getting someone on the phone and getting someone to return your calls and just getting an answer. And I think the state can do better at streamlining and making that more user-friendly, more customer-friendly.

PBN: How so?

SANFORD: I think it would be great to have a one-stop center or an advocate. Someone that you can call with a question, whether it be taxes, Department of Labor, workers' comp. questions. Or perhaps you don't know which department you need to speak with. But some-

one you can talk to and not only will they point you in the right direction but they will also help you get an answer and also do follow up and make sure you were satisfied with the answer.

I did work with the R.I. Economic Development Corporation and they would often point me in the right direction and sometimes they'd even get me the right forms to fill out, but that was as far as it went. Then I'm still struggling two weeks later, a month later, trying to get the answer and they're not there.

PBN: You started the company just before the economy crashed. How were you able to get through that as a young company and what would you tell others in similar situations?

SANFORD: I really believe that you have to forge ahead, regardless. The [economy] is going to do what it wants with or without you.

I don't think we've seen an entire industry collapse - debatable about the housing industry - but outside of that we haven't seen an entire industry collapse. So even if an industry is having some economic hardships there are always companies that are going to grow and going to succeed.

If you're good at what you do it's a great time to really hunker down, invest ... it's a great time to focus on really developing your people and your systems and really come out as a leader on the other side.

If you can succeed and strive during these downturns, on the upswing when the economy's roaring along again you're going to be positioned to do better. ■

INTERVIEW

CHRIS SANFORD

POSITION: Owner of PuroClean

BACKGROUND: After graduating college, Chris Sanford served in the U.S. Navy for seven years and, for part of the time, was stationed in Newport. He is now a naval reserve officer.

EDUCATION: Bachelor's in economics from the College of the Holy Cross in 2000 and a master's in business administration from the University of Rhode Island in 2007.

FIRST JOB: Newspaper route in Warwick at age 12

RESIDENCE: Providence

AGE: 32

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