

Staying afloat in tough times

Watching dolphins is a great way to make a living. But it hasn't always been smooth sailing for Hank Renzenbrink and Rob Main.

Hank and Robert started Sea All Dolphin Swims in 1998 after a downturn in the professional fishing industry. With their backgrounds in fishing, teaching and water skills, they had very little tourism experience but were determined to succeed.

Sea All is a great concept, due to its informal approach to customers, commitment to professional business practices and environmentally friendly focus. But it has faced its share of challenges, which it is tackling head-on thanks to Judy Vanrenen from the SBMS Experienced Business Mentors and Small Business Victoria.



Sea All is the only licensed dolphin swim tour operator on western side of Port Phillip Bay, and offers an exceptional variety of activities. Hank and Rob's friendly, casual and intimate style ensures visitors enjoy themselves and feel comfortable. Rob captains the trusty Maureen M boat and Hank holds the fort in the office, ensuring everything runs smoothly on the ground.

Rob is a third generation Queenscliff professional fisherman who really knows Port Phillip Bay and its unique weather and tidal conditions. Hank has worked as a teacher and years of competitive surfing and swimming have given him the water skills required to conduct safe snorkel tours.

During the 3.5 hour boat tours, which are designed to protect the fragile local ecosystem, guests can swim with wild dolphins and seals in Port Phillip Bay. Tours also include sightseeing, boom netting, and snorkelling in a marine park on reefs of colourful fish, sea stars and sponges – all just an hour from Melbourne.

With a clever blend of fun, adventure and education, Rob and Hank ensure the Sea All experience is one guests will remember forever.

School groups make up 40 per cent of clients, families 30 per cent, couples, single travellers and visiting friends and relatives 25 per cent, and corporate and social groups five per cent. Four in five customers are local, and about 15 per cent international.

While they had a winning product and growing reputation, Hank and Rob needed to ensure their business survived and thrived in the wake of controversial State Government dredging in Port Phillip Bay.

“We were initially dealing with a perception problem as well as water quality issues in a critical time of our season,” Hank says.

Port Phillip Bay Tourism Task Force recommended Sea All use the SBMS to help overcome the negative public image which arose from channel deepening publicity. It was also a great opportunity to work on the business rather than in it.

“If tour quality was to be affected by dredging operations we felt that we would need to compensate with par excellent customer service,” Hank says. “(The) business was also vulnerable at time of stress with partnership complications and workload issues.”

Hank and Robert were matched with SBMS mentor Judy Vanrenen, an experienced small businesswoman who has run travel-related companies for man years. Judy now heads Botanica World Discoveries.

The SBMS is a non-government, non-profit organisation of volunteer expert mentors who give their time and experience to help small business. It is supported by Small Business Victoria, which refers clients to it.

Hank and Rob saw Judy for four sessions over six months under the Port Phillip Channel Deepening Support Package, twice in Melbourne and twice in Port Lonsdale.

Judy provided tips in areas such as booking procedures, cancellations and complaints. She also helped with improving customer service strategy and implementation, human resource strategies, staff training, and integrating office and boat staff. Using her marketing experience, Judy encouraged them to host Geoff Cox’s TV show *Coxy’s Big Break*, which further boosted their credibility and profile.

Judy also:

- Reassured them that the channel deepening would probably not affect the business much.
- Provided positive action plans to ensure the business wasn’t affected.

- Encouraged them to tell schools it was ‘business as usual’, which resulted in similar sales to previous years.
- Offered suggestions and tips from her personal trade show experience.
- Suggested a proper Business Plan, customer service form and Training/Induction Program.
- Encouraged a proper Partnership Agreement with an exit strategy for both partners.

Since seeing Judy, Hank and Robert have been able to reduce their personal work load, which had impacted on their work-life balance. They also employed an experienced and efficient business manager.

Sea All has also completed a new business plan and budget which will be revised regularly. The plan, with Judy’s tips on improved employment conditions, has also helped improve employees’ sense of ownership. The company now has three permanent and 10 casual staff.

“This new plan has given our business a platform and a much needed focus to move forward,” Hank says. “It includes an action plan to ensure the goals and objectives are achieved. Our new business plan will also be essential for applying for grants, or loans should the opportunities present. Overall the new plan adds value and strength to our business.

“Judy was a great help to the business just by simply reassuring us that some of the steps we were already planning in regards to the channel deepening were worthwhile and this gave us the confidence to go ahead with those steps.”

Hank said heading into the season he and Rob were particularly concerned about the impact on school tours if teachers decided to do seek alternative activities. They were also unsure whether to tell the schools in advance or simply hope for the best.

“Judy’s advice to send out a circular to the teachers of the many school groups describing the possible conditions due to the dredging and reassuring the teachers that the tours will still be a worthwhile learning experience was very well received and appreciated by the teachers,” Hank says.

“This gave us the confidence to proceed into the busy school season instead of worrying about the conditions being a disappointing to the teachers and having to deal with complaints after the tour. As it turned out dredging didn’t affect the tours at all and the circular became a positive PR exercise anyway.”

Hank and Robert hope the recent improvements will boost sales and allow wages to be increased, and have started looking for a shop/office so they can move from their busy home office. A recent modern harbour redevelopment has also inspired the business to improve its professional image and replace old and worn equipment before next season.

Without SBMS Hank and Robert say Sea All would “still be travelling with out any real direction of focus”. “We are very grateful for the terrific mentoring we received from Judy,” they say.

Judy says the business now has a clearer focus of priorities and direction. “This will allow them to increase sales and profitability into the future,” she says. “It will also ensure they have a better quality of lifestyle as owners and investors in the business.

“I was able to give them focus and direction at a very stressful time. This meant Hank was able to change his outlook from negative to positive. I was able to assist him to prioritise his tasks and to understand what was and is important to the business. Running a small business is lonely and we all need help from time to time to work ‘on’ our business, as well as ‘in it’.”

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