

You're in the business of Surveying... whether you like it or not!



By Donald Cooper, MBA

Toronto-based, international management speaker and coach, Donald Cooper, has recently completed a 5-city 'tour', delivering his 1-day Business Management 'Boot Camp' to Ontario Land Surveyors across Ontario. He got rave reviews.

Donald has been both a world-class manufacturer (think Cooper Sporting Goods) and an award-winning retailer. For the past 20 years he has worked with business owners and managers in over 40 industries around the world, helping them to sell more, manage smarter, grow their bottom line...and have a life.

Here are some of his observations about how Land Surveyors can more effectively manage their business and their bottom line. Donald is a no-nonsense, bottom-line guy and therein lies his real value.

Having just spent a good chunk of time working with many Ontario Land Surveyors, I have a number of observations that may be helpful. Keep in mind that I'm not a 'surveying guy'; I'm a 'business management guy'.

1) Manage your business:

First off, Land Surveyors are very much like a lot of other respected professionals. You don't think like business people. And why should you...nobody ever told you to. In seven years of education and study, there was probably not five minutes spent on showing you how to run the business of Land Surveying. It's the same with doctors, dentists, vets and lawyers. I'll never run out of work. Several Surveyors who attended our "Business Management Boot Camp for Land Surveyors" told me that they learned more about how to run a business, in that one day, than they had learned in their entire careers.

So, here's the first news flash. If you own or manage a Land Surveying practice, you are in the business of Land Surveying and you need to spend more time **working "on" the business**, and a bit less time working **"in"** it. You need to spend some time working on...

- Finding ways to add more customer value.
- Proactively marketing and selling that value in a way that 'grabs' your target customers and clearly differentiates you from your competitors.
- Developing and managing your team.
- Proactively managing your 'numbers' and your bottom line.
- Planning your future, including how your business model might change to create a more relevant and profitable future.

2) Manage your bottom line:

You're getting paid about the same fees for your services as you did 20 years ago and that speaks to your not communicating your value story (marketing) and, in some cases, not valuing yourselves and having the guts to ask what you're worth. Nobody will ever think we're worth more than we do. Funny how that works!

You all complained about profitability...and here's the info you need to improve your bottom line. During the part of my program where we talked about the "math of profitability", I showed that, for a typical Surveying Business:

- Increasing prices by just 5% could **grow your bottom line by about 50%**, if customers didn't notice, or didn't care, because you're so good at what you do,
- Increasing sales by just 5% could **grow your bottom line by about 40%**...and,
- Reducing expenses by just 5% could **grow your bottom line by about 45%**.

If you could actually achieve some combination of these three, the bottom-line improvement would be spectacular. But you have to proactively manage the business.

Now, here's the part that nobody thinks about. By improving your bottom line by, let's say \$80,000, you increase the eventual selling price of your business by \$320,000 to \$450,000. Why? Because businesses typically sell for a multiple of 4 to 6 times their earnings.

3) Manage your marketing:

Most Surveyors don't do well when it comes to marketing. Some of you even believe that marketing and selling are somehow 'unprofessional'. Even though most of you told

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me that you'd like to, or need to, increase sales, not one of you had a sales and marketing 'Hit List' of prospects to go after this year. Here, below, is the start of a possible marketing 'Hit List' for you. Add to it, if you'd like, but start with these:

- a) Government Departments at all levels,
- b) Utilities,
- c) Builders,
- d) Road Building Contractors,
- e) Lawyers,
- f) Real Estate Agents,
- g) Banks & Mortgage Brokers.

You need to be known, trusted, differentiated and respected by those who hire Surveyors, and those who might refer Surveyors to others. Getting to be known, trusted and differentiated is called "marketing".

Your website is also an important marketing tool and most Surveyor's websites aren't marketing focused. For a pretty good example of how to use your website to explain and market your services, check out the "Land surveying" tab at oxfordlandsurveying.com. Check out other Surveyor's websites and see what you can learn about how to make yours better. I studied over 20 Surveyor's websites as I prepared for my presentations and my guess is that you should check out at least that many to see what you can pick up.

4) Manage your future:

New and innovative business models are showing up in the Surveying business...just like they are in every industry. Firms are consolidating and Surveyors are consolidating with Engineering and Planning Firms to create entirely new business models.

How might your business model need to change to be competitive in the "new future"? What will Land Surveying look like in 5 years? How will it be different? What's your plan? Don't have an emotional attachment to an unecological business model.

Surveyors don't share or partner easily. In all five of my "Boot Camp" sessions, it was like pulling teeth to get anyone to offer any thoughts, or share best practices. As individuals, during breaks and at lunch, you were warm, friendly and generous. But "in session", most of you were simply not going to share.

In discussions following the programs, several of you told me that this same unwillingness to share was preventing many smaller firms from partnering to take on big jobs that they couldn't consider doing on their own. So, for many of you, your unwillingness to share is limiting your future.

Some of the resistance to the important Ontario Digital Cadastre project probably relates to this same feeling that we need to keep our cards close to our vest. The Cadastre is the future...embrace it. So, perhaps there needs to be a change in heart and attitude about sharing and partnering in

the Surveying profession. I don't know who will lead that initiative...but it needs to be someone from within your profession.

In conclusion, what you do matters. That you do it wonderfully...matters. That you do it profitably...matters. One of the most important keystones of our economic system and our way of life is the concept of property ownership. As Land Surveyors, you are key players in maintaining the integrity of that right. We depend on you. That you need to be more valued and appreciated for what you do is clear. The path to achieving that is also clear.


a) You need to be as good at running your business as you are at Land Surveying.

b) You need to be more effective marketers and promoters of your industry and your specific business.

c) Collectively and individually, you need to have the courage to ask for decent and appropriate fees for what you do. But that won't happen until you do a better job of communicating your value.

d) You need to think about how your business model might evolve to be competitive in a changing and more competitive world?

An offer of help: Each month I publish a free, monthly **Management E-Newsletter**. It's a seven minute read that will help and encourage you to sell more, manage smarter, grow your bottom line...and have a life. If you'd like to receive the E-Newsletter you can sign up at donaldcooper.com, or you can email me, and I'll make it happen. On our website we also offer a number of free business tools.

If you'd like to create a clear and compelling Vision for the future of your business, you can download our 28 page **Vision Critical Guide**, also at donaldcooper.com. This Guide, 7 years in the making, has been transformational for the many businesses that have embraced it. It leads business owners and their team through a simple but insightful process of creating clarity about the future of their business...and an Action Plan to get there. It gently asks tough but important questions that need to be asked...and almost never are. It also includes specific examples and a number of helpful Implementation Templates. The entire process is designed to be self-guiding and intuitive. 

Donald Cooper, MBA, CSP, HoF, has been both a world-class manufacturer and an award-winning retailer. Now, as a Toronto-based international management speaker and coach, he helps business owners and managers to rethink, refocus and re-energize their business to sell more, manage smarter, grow their bottom line...and have a life. Donald can be reached at 416-252-3704 or by email at donald@donaldcooper.com. For more info and free management articles, or to receive our free, monthly E-Newsletter, go to donaldcooper.com.