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Strong Motivation

Sudden professional and personal change turned Sandy Hansen from a reluctant leader to a motivational speaker. **BY ELIZABETH MILLARD**

PHOTO BY MARSHALL FRANKLIN LONG

As Sandy Hansen knows well, life can throw quite a wicked curveball sometimes. Once an insurance agent in St. Cloud, she was enjoying the newlywed life in 2003 when her husband, Randy, died of leukemia complications. She knew almost nothing about his feed business store, but was determined to keep it going despite a tough time in the agriculture industry and significant challenges at the store itself as it teetered near bankruptcy.

Less than five years later, she doubled business and implemented fresh strategies that should keep it going strong well into the future. Her experiences with sudden leadership and personal tragedy became such an inspiration to those who heard them that she was increasingly asked to talk on the topics, and ended up founding her own motivational speaking business, Rock Solid Motion.

As she looks toward business expansion and criss-crosses the country to tell her story, Hansen feels that both businesses are growing in a positive direction, but it took a great deal of hard work to get to this point. Here's a glance at how she navigated the storm:

Q: Why did you decide to run the feed store, rather than sell the business?

>> I knew that it was important to my husband, and I wanted to honor his memory. Also, I didn't know how difficult it would be. The first thing I did after his death was to become introverted, and it wasn't until a few years later, when we'd been near bankruptcy for some time, that I really realized that I had to listen to people who were telling me what to change. If I was going to run this business, I had to ask for help, and that was a big breakthrough.

Q: What kinds of changes did you make to the operations to spark such a rebound in growth?

>> One of the biggest things was to address accounts receivable, which had become almost unmanageable. People were paying, but they were taking longer to pay, and maybe weren't paying their full bills. But instead of taking a confrontational stance, we looked at the customers as being on our team and striving for the same thing. We worked with customers individually on a plan, and took the position that we were standing shoulder to shoulder with them, looking at the horizon together. That definitely helped, because sometimes just having that conversation and fostering open communication were enough. They understood that we care, that we're willing to work with them, and it was a huge benefit to changing our receivables.

Q: What sparked the decision to go into motivational speaking, in addition to running the business?

>> It just kind of came naturally out of having the feed business. Within a few months after my husband died, I was asked to start speaking on the topic. For example, I'd go to a church to talk about how I used my spirituality to keep my hope alive. Then, I began to

speak on business strategy as well, and it grew from there. It really all became about finding balance and leadership in the midst of chaos, and people really wanted to hear about that. After doing it pro bono for a few years, I decided to make it more formal.

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—SANDY HANSEN, FOUNDER, ROCK SOLID MOTION


Q: How did you come up with the name, Rock Solid Motion?

>> Because my spirituality is my base, I wanted to incorporate that into the name, as the “rock” part. “Solid” is the foundation from which I believe everything needs to start, and “motion” is simply moving forward in a positive direction.

Q: What kind of topics seem to resonate most with your audiences?

>> One thing I'm finding is that people are stressed out and worn out; leaders don't often do a good job at taking care of themselves. So, people are very receptive to talking about how to be healthy when things might be falling apart. It's amazing how, in the midst of chaos, leaders tend to hunker down and work all the time, so I think it really resonates with them to hear that just enjoying simple pleasures like reading a book or sitting down and having a cup of coffee can have a major effect.

Q: What do you see ahead, in terms of both of your businesses?

>> On the feed business side, I think we're going to start tapping into different resources and become less regional. I want to look at a worldwide network, and although that's a huge undertaking, that's really my vision for the business. For the motivational speaking, I don't see it as a separate company, it really is done in conjunction with the feed business, because many of the topics come from what I've learned as a leader and business owner. I think both are growing in very positive directions. 

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