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Yoga teacher stretches to build healthy business

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Rosa Santana, who runs a Hallandale Beach yoga studio business at 110 N. Federal Highway called Yogarosa, is getting a business makeover from Broward SCORE.

Rosa Santana's yoga studio is lined with mats, topped with students struggling to wrap a foot around their necks or wrestle themselves into the groaning Astavakrasana, aka, the dreaded Crooked Man's pose.

"Wait. Everyone's just looking around. It's a spectator sport now?" Santana taunts them before dropping to the floor, easily folding herself into the pose. She continues to issue instructions as she holds her legs, laced up and over one shoulder and twisted to the side, in a handstand about five inches off the ground, then untwists to resume helping the students.

When one succeeds, Santana's joyfully screams "You got it! Woo Hoo!"

A dedicated teacher, she has been struggling since 2001 to make her yoga studio, [Yogarosa](#), successful. Over time, she has collected a steadfast following of yogins hooked on her practice of the classic Iyengar yoga, one of only a few such studios in South Florida. But after one failed partnership and years of balancing both a heavy teaching load and managing a business, Santana needs help. So earlier this year, she sought a Miami Herald Small Business Makeover, conducted by Broward SCORE, a chapter of a nationwide nonprofit dedicated to helping entrepreneurs.

Though admittedly not yoga followers (all found Santana's business card depicting the Crooked Man pose scary), three SCORE counselors enthusiastically immersed themselves in the world of yoga.

What they found was a woman deeply schooled in her practice and its vast health benefits, but lacking in business acumen: Her business plan was outdated, she had no annual budget, no marketing plan and no clear idea, even, of whether the business makes money.

After being grilled during an initial meeting, Santana realized it was time to take stock.

"I sat down and meditated," she said when the group met a second time with suggestions. "It's tough because I had to look at myself and put my ego aside."

Santana, who studied graphic design in school, fell into yoga after back pain led her to the gym and finally to discover the discipline. When she started in 1995, the closest Iyengar studios were in Boca Raton and Miami, so she started teaching her own classes. In 2001, after borrowing \$6,000 from her dad and studying the U.S. Small Business Administration website, she opened her studio in a Hallandale Beach office building at 110 N. Federal Highway, with 10 students enrolled in 30 classes.

Over the years, she has found her niche in therapeutic yoga, although more advanced classes certainly offer a tough work out. Iyengar yoga — followers include Annette Benning and Seinfeld actor Michael Richards — was developed by B.K.S. Iyengar, named one of Time magazine's 100 most influential people

in 2004. Iyengar, 92, taught his first class in 1936, opened his own studio in India in 1974 and continues to teach classes worldwide. His practice focuses on body alignment to build strength, endurance and flexibility. Students can use blocks, straps or ropes to ensure proper alignment and build gradually from simple to highly complex poses.

In 2009, a student convinced Santana to expand and offered to help. Believing the partnership would allow her to devote her time to teaching and writing a book, Santana agreed to bring her students to a new 6,000-square-foot studio in exchange for a salary the first year and a 40 percent cut of profits after that. The partnership, however, failed and the pair parted on bad terms. She is back at her Hallandale location. While the experience put her behind schedule, Santana said it reaffirmed her vision for her Yogarosa studio.

“It’s really a community. Somebody dies and we all go to the funeral,” she said. “It’s really a family. I want to find a midway where I can sustain my business and have my family.”

SCORE’s experts, however, warned Santana that she needs to stop thinking like a yoga instructor running a business, and more like a businesswoman running a yoga studio.

Over the course of two meetings, SCORE’s Dave Harris, with a background in marketing, Steve Fleisch, a marketing specialist with SMF Services, and Jan Wild, president of Success Through Enhanced Performance, quizzed Santana about her business plan, finances, marketing and operations.

With so many yoga classes seemingly ubiquitous in South Florida, they advised her to come up with a unique description of her studio to help her stand out. Once she defined herself, they explained a long list of free and cheap marketing tools available to her. “I’m big on low-cost, no-cost marketing,” Harris said.

They suggested she join Twitter, be more consistent with her Facebook page and post YouTube videos of sessions or poses. Fleisch also suggested revamping www.yogarosa.com so that visitors sign up, allowing Santana to collect information that she could then use to post text messages and define potential customers. They also suggested she tweak the information on her Web page to better explain what’s offered. Taking advantage of the free Google Places page, Fleisch pointed out, would easily allow Santana to expand her Web presence without spending money or much time.

Wild also pushed Santana to define her “unique selling proposition” — again, the definition she needs to stand out — and to improve her blog as a way of reaching potential students.

“All this technology is a beautiful thing when you market it to the masses,” he said. “But the big question is are you branded?”

In addition to defining herself for marketing purposes, Santana needed to take a hard look at finances, the group insisted. When they first met, Santana had just turned over her bank statements to an accountant to unravel her books and could only estimate her profits — she guessed about \$20,000 a year.

By the second meeting, Santana had hired a business manager, Lori Nadle, who had also been a student for the last nine years. She was rewriting her business plan and was eager to implement the group’s suggestions, listed in a five-page outline.

The key, the experts said, was getting her books in order and keeping track of money coming in and going out.

They suggested some operational changes including: having Santana teach introductory classes so new students could meet her; adding early classes for students before work; and contacting large, local companies about offering classes to their workforce.

They also suggested restructuring her classes and bundling them, so that students sign up for a trial period rather than enrolling in one class at a time.

“Make them feel that this is a program that is evolving and after 12 weeks or so let them know the next place where they’re going to go,” Wild said. “You need to go in and demand their respect to commit to you, that you can’t get results doing it twice. You need to sell the campaign.”

As for marketing, they suggested she develop a system of collecting reviews, so she could tweak the business as needed; redesign her Web page to focus on her geographic location and her bilingual skills; use Google’s free keyword tool to employ better words which would pop up more frequently in searches; de-emphasize the outside of her building, which contrasts sharply to the light-filled studio she has created inside; consider a text marketing campaign to attract new students; improve her blog to include key words to capture Internet searches; and consider advertising on Facebook, which she can manipulate to cost as little as \$10 plus a pay-per-click.

By the end, the group was very hopeful.

“You’ve been doing this for nine years and most businesses don’t last that long,” Fleisch said.

Wild reminded her that maintaining her business plan was crucial: “This is your bible and has to be in front of you at all times.”

Added Harris, the team leader: “We do a lot of counseling to businesses like yours and they’re often very resistant. Your attitude is great. Change is constant and you’ve to be open to it.”

By the end, weeks after her first meeting, Santana had already launched some of their suggestions, including rewriting her business plan. In her new version, she succinctly defines her mission and maps out expansion plans that include Miami Beach, Fort Lauderdale and Orlando over the next five years.

“I’m ready to grow up,” she said.