

# Cleaning Up After a Crisis

**Sharon Auck refused to let a major setback destroy her company.**

**T**he news felt like a kick to the stomach for Sharon Auck. Her business, Fresh Approach Cleaning Professionals, had just lost its single biggest client.

The decision wasn't because of Fresh Approach's performance or anything that Auck could have controlled, but that was little

comfort. "They were the backbone of the business," she recalled.

Auck had started the full-service cleaning company in 1988. She held down a separate day job while competing for contracts. She would then hire a team of workers to clean customers' properties at night. Fresh Approach had gradually built a book of satisfied clients, though one customer was much larger than the others.

And with that client gone, the fate of the business was suddenly in doubt.

At first, Auck admits, she doubted herself, but only for a little while. She realized that

saving her business would require her to take aggressive action—not that there was really any question about what she would do.

As an entrepreneur, she said, "you have to do whatever it takes to make it happen."

To keep the business going, Auck quit her day job and took responsibility for cleaning seven contracts by herself. Auck vacuumed, dusted and picked up garbage in offices every single day of the week. She took no weekends off, no vacation, no sick days, no holidays. She did that for seven years.

Auck is the mother of four girls, but she had always considered Fresh Approach her fifth child. You just don't give up on your kids, she said.

"I knew we weren't done," Auck said. "I knew there was more we could do."

She was right, of course. Because Auck went "all in" during a crucial time, the business eventually turned around and allowed her to hire employees to shoulder the cleaning jobs. Her team today includes about 16 workers. The major client she lost? It came back, too.

Operating Fresh Approach enabled each of Auck's daughters to earn a college degree. And last year, Fresh Approach got to go to college, too.

Auck was selected for the 10,000 Small Businesses program offered by Babson College and Goldman Sachs. The 11-week course is a graduate-level training program for small business owners who want to grow their companies and develop their leadership skills.

This was not a small commitment for Auck and the other students. The lessons, most of which were offered online, easily consumed 30 to 40 hours per week, and there was some travel, too.

But the work was worth it. It showed Auck that she had built something of a gem in Fresh Approach. She possessed a solid business model with clearly outlined procedures and policies. And she made a slew of contacts through 10,000 Small Businesses. She's in a great position to grow her business.

"I have to tell you," Auck said, "it was a game changer."

But none of it would have been possible if she hadn't believed in her business when it needed her the most. "I couldn't let one person decide the fate of my life." ■

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