



## They pay cost of being boss

**CORPUS CHRISTI, TX** — Jeff Berven never really was a desk guy. He earned his undergraduate degree at Washington State University and an MBA at Texas Tech University before taking his seat at a stock brokerage firm in Dallas. Then he found a chair at an independent oil and gas company for several years.

In spring 2000, he decided to stand on his own. “The money was very good,” said Berven, who now owns Buy Polar Insulation in Port Aransas. “But there are more important things than making money.” So in a span of three months, Berven quit his job, married and moved to the beach.

How to support his family, while satisfying his career goals, was the next big question. Like a growing number of entrepreneurs, he took his future into his own hands and became his own boss. After finding success, he kept investing in himself. “I knew I didn’t want to work for somebody else. I had done that,” he said. “I wanted to find something I could own and not have a lot of employees.”

He contacted BizMatch, a business brokerage firm that matches investors with potential businesses for sale. He was looking for something with real property – not a business that came with leasing and a bunch of employees to supervise. His road led him to Make It Shine, a six-bay, four-vacuum, self-service car wash covered in graffiti and full of mechanical issues. “I knew nothing about car washes, pumps or soap,” he said. “But I went there and looked at it, then looked at the numbers.”

It was a viable business, he decided, and one with the potential to earn money 24 hours a day. He spent nearly that much time over the next few months learning about car washes. It was a challenge, but with some help he fixed it up – paint, re-roofing, repairs.

The other matches weren’t as exciting, he said. Of the three most interesting, the other two carried too much liability or not enough real property. “A car wash just seemed like something fun to try,” Berven said. An existing business can be an exciting prospect, the Small Business Administration says on its Web site, and comes with considerable advantages. Along with a reduction in startup costs, cash flow can start faster and a reputation is built in.

At the same time, that reputation might not be stellar and the seller might have an inflated idea of what his or her business is worth, the site warns. Financial skeletons like sloppy bookkeeping or hidden issues with accounts receivable, for example, also can haunt existing businesses, the SBA cautions. Four more successful car wash locations later, Berven was searching for a new opportunity. Life at home was changing – he and his wife, Sally, have two boys, and Berven was through being buckled into work that didn’t take full advantage of his education and people skills.

“Although it was a good business to do – I’d do it again – I was looking forward to something a little more socially active,” he said. He sold the first three sites for a profit but held the last two close while he sought out his next move.

Depending on a business owner’s comfort level, getting out of a business investment can be just as easy as getting in, or as difficult, the SBA reports. It recommends seeking help from professionals, including SCORE and local Small Business Development Centers such as Del Mar College’s.

In January 2007, still holding two car wash properties, Berven teamed up with the owner of Buy Polar Insulation. A numbers guy at heart, Berven was drawn to the fact that it already had a leader – the man who started the company needed someone to manage the finances. “It wasn’t a huge company, but it had a good reputation among the builders as being a quality company,” Berven said.

With no knowledge of the insulation business, Berven dove in, expecting to learn as he went but mainly focusing on bringing efficiency to the business’s record-keeping and financial affairs. Within two months, he was its sole owner. The previous owner had to step away to handle personal issues, Berven said. “Dealing with people is the same regardless of selling them insulation or a car or anything,” Berven said. “I wasn’t too intimidated by it. It’s the type of business that relies on service and relies on people being responsible.”

The company’s reputation – and Berven’s handling of the financial accounts – is reflected in the business’s growth of at least 50 percent in the past year, he said, and that it retains its first clients since its start in 2002.

You don’t have to be a daredevil to try something new, Berven stresses. But you do have to prepare. Come up with a business plan – tools are available at the SBA Web site and through the Del Mar College Small Business Development Center – and decide whether you’re ready for the commitment.

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