

Fast-track enterprise assistance

Program provides young owners with insight and guidance

BY LAURA KOSS-FEDER

EVERY ENTREPRENEUR can use some guidance from time to time. That time came for Sarah Endline last year, when her two-year-old candy

company, Sweetriot Inc., hit a plateau. Business at the Manhattan firm was good, but expansion efforts were running into human resource and sales issues.

Eager to improve, Ms. Endline, 36, signed up in April 2007 for the then-new Accelerator Program run by the Entrepreneurs' Organization, formerly the Young Entrepreneurs' Organization.

She joined a group of 25 other entrepreneurs—owners of every-

thing from a handbag manufacturer to an information technology venture—for day-long education sessions held quarterly.

"The program allows new entrepreneurs like myself to learn and come up with solutions that really work," Ms. Endline says.

Topic-specific

THE TOP TWO LESSONS she learned addressed her plateau problem. She found out how to find the best em-

ployees by asking the right questions in the first five minutes of an interview, and how to improve sales by asking customers what they want and—most important—listening carefully to their answers.

The first session of the program was devoted to broad business strategies. Subsequent sessions focused on human resources, finance and sales.

Jim Rycerson, a professional sales coach and author, led the sessions,

ACCELERATOR PROGRAM

ANNUAL COST \$1,000

CLASS SIZE 30 maximum

COMPANY ELIGIBILITY More than \$250,000 a year in sales

GRADUATION After 3 years or when sales top \$1 million

SECOND CLASS Begins Sept. 15

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which were held downtown, at 55 Exchange Place.

Mixers after each class let students network with each other and some of the organization's 200 New York area members, all of whom head a business with sales of more than \$1 million a year.

Ben Hoffman, 30, says knowledge he acquired in the program helped him set up standard hiring, sales management and administration processes.

"I was just working day to day, without any real procedures in place," says Mr. Hoffman, the chief executive of CityHunt, a seven-year-old Manhattan firm that creates team-building scavenger hunts. He hopes to boost revenues to \$1 million—the level set for "graduation" from the program—from \$400,000 within the next 12 months.

Abbas Ismail, 24, who entered the Accelerator Program in February, says he picked up a good idea in his first session. Acting on that information, he is arranging to have cold-calls for his Web site development firm outsourced.

"It will allow me to boost my sales and bring in more business," Mr. Ismail says. XO Global Inc., which he founded in 2006, has annual sales of about \$250,000.

More school, please

THOUGH MEMBERS of the first group found the program helpful, many say that they also wish there were literally more to it.

"There's just so much to learn—especially in the first few years of business—that I would like us to meet more often," Mr. Hoffman says.

He would like to step up the schedule to every other month from quarterly. It would also be valuable for students to get together in informal discussion groups with no more than four members, he says.

Ms. Endline, who is a full EO member now that her sales have hit \$1 million, would like just one more class—a summary session to let students tie everything together and feel more like they "really graduated."

The program is still evolving, according to Fran Biderman-Gross, Accelerator's director and president of Advantages, a promotions, design and printing firm in Flushing, Queens. "We are constantly evaluating it, since it's so new," she says.