

**VENTURED  
GAINS**  
Frank Hennessey



# Companies undergo an extreme makeover

One is a third-generation family business that distributes wholesale foods to restaurants, another is a company that cleans air ducts but has underused expertise to deliver customers air quality testing and consultation, and the third is an automotive tool-and-die maker that, well, *need we say more?* They are very different companies, but all three are now under the microscope of a Walsh College Extreme Small Business Makeover.

Inspired by the many "makeover" programs in the media, Walsh College gathered its own resources plus 10 business advisors, including our own Mike Semanco, president of Hennessey Capital, to donate services worth more than \$40,000 to help the three chosen companies meet their unique business challenges. The three companies were selected in September, and their makeovers are underway.

I am a fan of using universities and students to help companies with their strategies, tactics and systems. I have done this over the years, and their fresh thinking is always helpful. The Walsh program takes that idea up a notch by recruiting outside experts as well as this year's Adams Entrepreneurial Fellow in its master's degree program. It is a great example of the kind of contribution our colleges and universities can make to the area economy.

Attorneys, accountants and business coaches don't usually give away their services, but under the Walsh umbrella, they become part of a high-visibility project and a collaborative team that could pay off in new relationships, contacts and knowledge in the long run. And the three companies that were chosen – they have been interviewed, site-visited, examined and discussed in depth by the consulting team and are about to find out

## ► MAKEOVER

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what kind of changes they might make to thrive in today's tough business environment.

- Sanit-Air, based in Troy, has all the equipment and staff to clean air ducts, but it also has the expertise to do air-quality testing, contamination remediation and consulting. Its best opportunity for growth comes from its expertise; the company needs help to find markets for its service, brand itself in those markets and recruit new customers.

- Wolverine Carbide Die, another Troy company, has an excellent record of creating die sets for forging particularly difficult automotive parts. However, two of its customers recently closed and another moved to Korea. That creates the same challenges hundreds of other small companies are facing right now in the automotive business.

- Atlas Wholesale Foods, based in Detroit, was started as a family business selling Feta cheese and other Greek specialties to small restaurants in the area. As the third generation

of the family surveys the market, smaller restaurants are closing down and large regional and national food distributors are moving in.

The makeover will help only those three companies, but the process of self-examination they are going through would benefit about any company. Just to get into the program, these organizations had to look at themselves and identify an area where they faced a business challenge. They also had to convince the judges they were committed to making changes – even if they might be difficult or painful. Not every business is ready for that.

Many of us want to overcome challenges, but we don't want to do anything different to meet them. If the changes these companies have to make become painful, they will at least have a solid team to coach them through the process. We'll check back with them over the next six months, because they are certain to have good stories to tell.

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