

BY MICHAEL J. MCDERMOTT

Connecting the dots

An executive coach takes a creative approach to helping clients

Most people have experienced the thrill of seeing a recognizable image emerge as they guide a pencil through the correct sequence in a connect-the-dots puzzle. But it takes a special kind of creative mind to find a business plan hidden there—a mind like Andy Satter’s.

As founder and president of Andrew Satter & Associates, Satter spends a good portion of his time on executive leadership and coaching, which he describes as working with C-level professionals—such as chief financial officers, chief operating officers, and, of course, chief executive officers—on matters involving the human side of the business.

“The value we bring is helping them see the dots that are not yet visible and then figuring out new ways of connecting the dots,” Satter says. “Ours can be a very intuitive business, and implicit in that is the notion of risk-taking. On our part, we have to say things to clients they may not want to hear. On their part, we may be asking them to challenge their core beliefs.”

Satter’s clients tend to be very successful men and women, and they often have the egos commonly associated with achieving that status. There is risk involved in being candid with such people and bringing up uncomfortable facts that challenge their success paradigm. To pull it off, he relies heavily on creativity.

“Creativity is being able to stop, evaluate a situation, and have the courage to risk putting forth ideas that might seem counterintuitive or go against the current in a way that others can hear,” Satter says. “Ideas are a dime a dozen, and they evaporate quickly unless you do something with them. What differentiates good from great is the ability to formulate insights and then be able to take them from concept to implementation. Getting from the ‘Aha!’ moment to implementation is what separates great companies from run-of-the-mill companies.”

Fortunately, Satter has always had an inclination toward creativity in business, as well as in other areas of his life. After graduating from Boston College in 1976 with a major in psychology and a minor in film, he planned on becoming a filmmaker. But life had other plans for him.

While working as a bartender at a New York beach the summer after graduation, Satter began training to run in the New York City Marathon. While jogging on the beach one day, he spotted a small plane towing an advertising banner—and got the idea to start a business organizing sponsored running races. He and a friend did just that, and for the next five years their sports marketing company put on races all over the United States and in Bermuda.

The company was successful, but Satter



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eventually grew bored with it and sold his share to his partner. Recruited by advertising giant Ogilvy & Mather, he worked there for a couple of years but still felt restless. “I wanted to be on the creative side of the business as a copywriter, but they kept promoting me through the account side,” he says.

Eventually he quit O&M and went to work with a relative who had a small human resources consulting practice. The arrangement turned out to be mutually beneficial, with Satter learning the business side of the consulting field and his relative benefiting from his marketing expertise.

Although his relative died in a scuba-diving accident just two years later, Satter believes the experience opened a door for him. “She helped me, and I started to network,” he says. He hung out his own shingle in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1988, mostly doing freelance copywriting for advertising clients while he tried to get his consulting business off the ground. “I struggled for a year. With no mentor, no one to teach me the business, I was inventing everything as I went along.”

In 1990 he approached the advertising agency where he had previously worked—as a potential client. A former coworker was running the company’s training program, and he hired Satter to work with the agency’s creative teams. The experience served as an incubator for the people-focused aspect of what would become Satter’s specialty: executive and leadership coaching.

“How do you get art directors to work more effectively with their counterparts? How do you get business teams to interact successfully with creative teams? I did a lot of that kind of work with major ad agencies and other media companies, such as Random House, HBO, and MTV,” he says.

But Satter’s situation was becoming a classic good news/bad news scenario. “The good news was that I had a neat product and there was a need for it,” he says. “The bad news was that I was painting myself into a corner.”

Satter realized that he had been pigeonholed into a very narrow niche, which left him vulnerable. Training is one of the first areas to get cut when media companies fall on hard times, and that is just what happened in the early 1990s. He recalls finding himself with “plenty of white space” on his calendar, and he decided to use the time to take a hard look at where he was, where he wanted to be, and how he was going to get there.

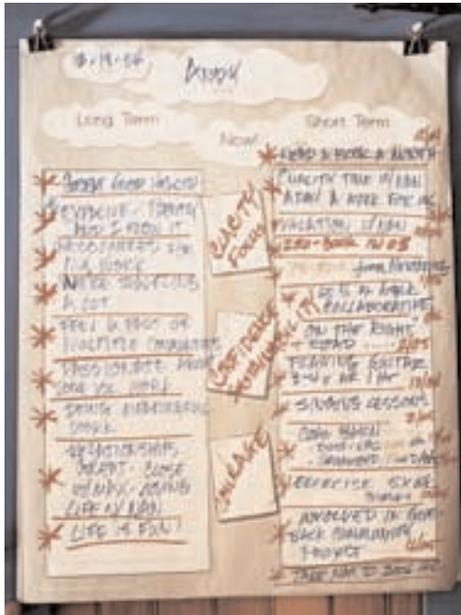
“I put together a brain trust,” he says. Combing through his Rolodex, Satter picked out eight people he respected, trusted, and knew would be candid with him. Commandeering a friend’s apartment in New York, he invited the group to dinner, walked them through his typical business pitch, and asked them to be “brutally honest” with him. They complied.

The message he heard was that to escape the corner he’d painted himself into, he had to expand his product offering and client base and diversify geographically.

The first area he focused on was expanding his product offering. He also created alliances with some noncompeting firms, and the business started to grow. But he didn’t do enough to broaden his target client base, and did nothing about diversifying geographically. Virtually all his clients were

still in midtown Manhattan, he says. Even so, Satter prospered and was on an upward course over the next five or six years—until September 11, 2001, brought his New York City-focused business to a screeching halt.

“When 9/11 happened, it made me realize that I really needed to diversify geographically and do more to achieve greater industry diversification,” he says. He singled out biotechnology, pharmaceutical companies, and nonprofits as likely sectors to target—but he had a problem. While he had the experience and credentials to approach any company in the media and financial services industries, he didn’t have the bona fides to gain immediate entry to the biotech and pharmaceutical



sectors. He got them by forming new strategic alliances, leveraging his strong networking skills, and relying on word-of-mouth referrals.

Today, Andrew Satter & Associates is a global network of 30 organizational-change consultants and trainers with a client list that includes Fortune 500 companies, mid-sized businesses, and not-for-profit organizations. It focuses on three core areas: organization effectiveness, team development, and executive/leadership coaching. The company includes three senior consultants and an expanding network of strategic partners.

Satter compares that network of colleagues to a sports team having a strong bench or bullpen. “We’re a virtual organization in that regard. We like being nimble and being a boutique firm. It gives me the freedom to do some things I enjoy doing.” Among those are hiking, cross-country skiing, reading, playing the electric guitar, and tending the organic vegetable garden behind his home in New Paltz, New York, where his company is headquartered.

He is also exploring the benefits of mentoring for

developing the next generation of leaders, who will be taking over as the baby boomers retire. With coauthor Diane Russ, he recently published a research study on this topic, “Building the Leadership Pipeline in Corporate America: Why Smart Companies Use Mentoring as Part of Their Talent Management Strategy.”

Andy Satter has learned many lessons during his entrepreneurial business career, but one stands out: “First and foremost, know your strengths and weaknesses. Build on the former and find others who complement you on the latter. Know what you know, and try to surround yourself with people who know what you don’t.”

Michael J. McDermott, a freelance writer specializing in business and technology, is based in Carmel, New York. Businesses profiled in this column are clients of the Northwestern Mutual Financial Network. Andrew Satter is a client of network representative Don Badgley. If you have a candidate for this column, please e-mail Creative Living editor Catherine O’Neill Grace at cgrace@forbes.com.

