

Q & A

Small businesses are the engine of economic growth in the Palmetto State. So what's it like to own and operate a small business in South Carolina?

After Diana and Hal were married in 1984, they moved back to SC where they began growing Grace Outdoor, a billboard company. Today, they operate 26 digital billboards and over 300 traditional billboards across the Southeast. As they will attest, it's been hard work, the business climate has changed over time and government sometimes gets in the way. Nevertheless, they are proud of their role in shaping civil society and being part of South Carolina's economic engine.

Q: How many people does Grace Outdoor employ?

A: We employ nine people. My father ran his own small business and Hal and I started our own company when we were very young. I guess entrepreneurship is just in our blood

Q: What value does work have for you - meaning, what role do you think work has in ordering civil society?

A: We are very proud that we are employers in this community and take that responsibility seriously. It is important to us to provide a safe and stimulating environment for our employees. We work hard to treat everyone with dignity and respect. The Bible encourages us to work so we can be responsible for ourselves and our families. If we can offer that along with an environment that gives proper respect to each person, then you have a win-win situation.



Q: What's one thing that inspires you to come to work everyday?

A: We are proud of the culture we have built at Grace Outdoor. I was inspired by watching both the men and women's USC basketball teams this year as they played in the tournament. What they exhibited was some amazing team work. And also, just a lot of really hard work. I think they proved that people are capable of so much when they work together. I hope that people of every race, gender and age can see that working together toward a common goal can be inspiring and rewarding.

Q: Let's talk on a macro scale first and then go micro for a while. As a business owner you are part of the free-market, capitalist system. Since the 1970's those living on a dollar per day or less has declined 80%, yet today more American's think their children will be worse off than they were. As a small business owner, what do you think of these statistics more broadly?

A: That is a hard statistic to interpret. I think it is pretty clear that my children have more than I do. Perhaps it is just our perspective. Education is more available today than ever. There are many options for getting a degree today, far more than ever before, and therefore that should equal better opportunities for our young people. I do not think my children will be worse off than I am, especially with the advantages they have available to them and the opportunities of a relatively stable economy. They will also benefit from new technology. Technology has certainly made our lives easier. That benefit will most likely continue as technology continues to get cheaper.

Q: Burrowing deeper now and more to the point of Grace Outdoor, would you have been able to achieve the success you have today if you were starting your business in the current business climate?

A: Starting Grace Outdoor would be much harder today. The regulations have become much more strict throughout the years, and the red tape sometimes seems unmanageable. Beyond that, the licenses and fees we are required to have and pay take a hefty toll.

Q: You're saying there's more required for success?

A: Success in the past, now or in the future is dependent on hard work and lots of it. I know of someone now who is starting their own outdoor company and he is doing it with a lot of hustle, hard work and ingenuity. I would have thought that it would be have been hard to start a new billboard company today as the regulations on billboards have tightened and it is harder today to get permits for new builds than it was 10 – 20 years ago. But this young person is doing it with all of the qualities I mentioned. It is inspiring for Hal and I to watch him. We are privileged to be able to help him in his venture.

Q: What role does government play in your day-to-day life as a small business owner?

A: As I mentioned before, the regulations are tough on us but to some degree I understand. Business licenses are also tough on us as it is really hard to have all of the appropriate licenses you need, not to mention the man hours it requires to stay compliant.



Taxes are another issue that is hard for us. When the economy tanked several years ago we almost went under. We had many friends who declared bankruptcy and we probably could have. But we chose to claw it out and hang on by the skin of our teeth. So we are still paying off some debts while at the same time paying taxes. It leaves very little left over. This is a stress on us and our businesses and takes our attention away from what we would prefer to be doing. It also limits our capital available for reinvestment and growth.

Q: Is there anything government could do right now that would help a small business like yours succeed?

A: Tax relief. It would be nice to be recognized as a valuable part of the economy. If small companies are over 50% of all businesses, then we are most likely employing a sizable part of the population with very limited resources.* We also do not have large accounting and legal departments to deal with the onerous tax code so simplifying it would be so helpful.

Q: Are there misconceptions about being a small business owner?

A: I have mentioned hard work and it cannot be understated. Hal and I know many other small business owners and we all agree that it is not a cake walk. But there are many rewards as we go and as we accomplish our goals. We also enjoy the flexibility we have and afford to our employees. Seeing our team work well together, enjoy it and be successful at it is a very good feeling. The fact that we provide jobs and a good work culture for other members of our community is something we are proud of.

Q: What do you hope the future holds for Grace Outdoor?

A: We are thankful. We have built a good company and we have great employees. Because of this we have experienced growth in the last few years. We have opportunities for more growth and we hope to capitalize on this. We also have children involved with us so running a multi-generational family business is becoming a reality for us. I believe the free-market economy has benefited us in the long run. For that we are truly thankful and feel very privileged. It's not for everyone; you have to take some risks and it can take its toll on a person, but I hope we are an example to other aspiring entrepreneurs.



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