

Q&A

STRATEGIC PLAN: BE A STRAIGHT SHOOTER

SD•B2B talks with the Marcela Escobar-Eck founder of Atlantis Group, a land use and strategic planning consulting firm.



MARCELA ESCOBAR-ECK
Atlantis Group

After several years of working in the public sector, Marcela Escobar-Eck started the Atlantis Group, a land use and strategic planning consulting firm in San Diego. Atlantis was recently named a best new emerging company by the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce.

Escobar-Eck took a few minutes recently to discuss about the company, her plan for success and some things that might surprise those who know her.

Q: Why did you found Atlantis Group?

A: I had been in government my entire career. After I left the city of San Diego in 2007, I had several other opportunities for high-ranking positions from local jurisdictions. I felt it was time to recapture some of my own time and identity again, so I decided to start my own consulting firm. After interviewing several friends and mentors that were consultants in my field, I decided that I could do it.

Q: What was the most important lesson you learned in founding and leading the Atlantis Group?

A: I think the most important lesson I've learned was actually something someone said: "Play nice in the sandbox." Be a straight shooter. Don't pretend you can deliver something you cannot. Set realistic expectations from the beginning.

There are times we end up talking people out of a project because they are approaching a piece of property with unrealistic

expectations. We recognize the limitations that certain properties and types of development projects have. We understand what can be achieved within the regulations, what is in the gray area and what is unrealistic. We do not take on projects that we know have a zero likelihood of success. **Q:** What is your daily motivation? What makes you get out of bed each morning?

A: Don't try to be what you are not. Invest back in your own business. Pay other businesses to do what they are good at to support your business — Web design, payroll, etc. Don't try to do it all yourself. Invest in your employees — pay fair wages and health care. Be supportive of family issues. The more flexible and supportive you are of your staff, the more they will be willing to go the extra mile when it is needed.

Q: What is the key to success for any business?

A: Besides being a straight shooter, surround yourself with people who fill the gaps of your knowledge and skill. Hire people who know how to find holes in your thinking or have skills you don't. You also have to be willing to listen. I have a network of friends that I can talk to or think and talk things through with. Recognize that you can't do it all. Pay people for what they are good at.

Also, I see people who won't invest in themselves, like having a quality web-

site. I see that as a mistake. People have to put their best foot forward. Small business owners need to make that investment because people will look at their website, and they need to have a professional showing.

Q: What is your daily motivation? What makes you get out of bed each morning?

A: A lot of it has to do with my mom. It goes back to her working two jobs as a legal immigrant and taking care of me. Her work ethic was unstoppable. She would get up at 4 a.m. to go to work; then go home and cook for her family. It's pretty hard to lack motivation when you had a mom who put in all her efforts every day to give me a good education.

Q: What is something about you that people would be surprised to know?

A: I always wanted to be an architect. When I didn't get in to Berkeley for architecture, I went to UC Davis and originally pursued a major in computer science. I tend to tackle problems from a very system-based, logical perspective. That surprises people because I come across as severely ADD most of the time. I just have a strong knack for processing multiple things at once.

I am an avid lover of orchids. I can never have too many orchids. I am strangely superstitious about certain things. I carry little talismans and lucky charms on me for various occasions. It must be the Colombian Catholic in me.