

INTERVIEWS OF LOCAL BUSINESS LEADERS

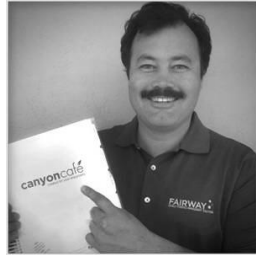
Ryan Comerford

President/CEO

FAIRWAY

Morro Bay

www.fairwaymgt.com



This EVC interview series focuses on business leaders who are directly impacting our local economy. This month Mike Manchak interviewed **Ryan Comerford**, President and CEO of **FAIRWAY**.

ABOUT THE COMPANY

FAIRWAY has provided "locally powered management solutions" since 1996, employing 100+ local employees serving more than 200,000 customers annually. FAIRWAY operates Morro Bay Golf Course, Dairy Creek Golf Course, Food Services at Diablo Canyon Power Plant and CateringUnlimited.Com. Visit their website at www.fairwaymgt.com to learn more about this exciting San Luis Obispo based company.

MM: Ryan, you and your team at FAIRWAY have achieved strong growth in your business segments, whether in hospitality and food service, special event catering and golf operations throughout the county. As I visit your managed establishments or website, I am amazed at the synergy and growth you have achieved in relatively short order. What are some of the intentional decisions and strategies you made to create FAIRWAY?

RC: Surround yourself by a strong team, trust them and delegate: As I have matured as an entrepreneur and a leader, I have learnt to rely on my fantastic team and allow them the latitude to make their own decisions and play a greater role in "steering our ship". This was not always case, initially I too often felt that "my way" was best "default position" for FAIRWAY. I was wrong and FAIRWAY suffered for it. These days, we are focusing on building a strong company culture focused on professional and personal growth for our employees. We have developed a great team who "take ownership" and are creating really exciting outcomes!

MM: What is your view about SLO County as a place to start and grow a business?

RC: SLO County is a great place “to be” and grow a business: There is a solid workforce consisting of accomplished professionals drawn to SLO County for its outstanding quality of life as well as educated & eager graduates from Cal Poly entering the workforce all the time. It’s my observation that our community (government, EVC, etc.) has really started advocating for business and are fostering business growth. This is a good recipe for success. My employees and I want to be here – it’s a lifestyle choice.

MM: As a producer of meals and therefore a large buyer of raw food products, is there a “local food ecosystem” practice that the region could learn and benefit from when it comes to buying local and supporting local farmers? Recently I read about a farm-to-school program and wonder whether this approach has more opportunity in your opinion on a commercial level for restaurants to a greater degree?

RC: I really hope that one day an entrepreneur will effectively figure out how to distribute our local food to our local restaurants: Like many in SLO, I am inspired by our farmers who serve our community and look forward to my Saturday morning ritual of riding my bike to the Madonna Plaza Farmer’s Market. FAIRWAY recently negotiated a “buying program” with a large National Food Distributor. We operate multiple F&B operations including Diablo Canyon’s Cafeteria, Catering and Vending operations. Security is tight at Diablo and we can’t have multiple trucks making food drops. It is a reality that the vast majority of restaurateurs cannot coordinate food deliveries with individual farmers. I have tremendous respect for Novo and Luna Red who send a “food buyer” to all the farmer’s markets - such a strategy is simply impractical for FAIRWAY and most food service operations. A solution might be the creation of a “cooperative” which could effectively gather our local farmer’s products and efficiently distribute them at a sustainable price point.

MM: What do special events such as SUNSET’s SAVOR THE CENTRAL COAST from a tourism perspective do for companies like yours and would you like to see more special events like this locally?

RC: “SAVOR” does a good job of putting SLO on the map for folks in outlier areas and provides a catalyst for industry leaders to take things to the next level: FAIRWAY sets up a “golf simulator” and “putting green” at Savor each year. The event provides good exposure for our courses to potential new golf customers and reminds our existing clients that it’s time to hit the links! If industry (wine, agritourism, golf, etc.) leaders, for example, golf course operators come together and focus on establishing SLO as a “golf destination”, we will create a sustainable competitive advantage for our industries and in the process capture essential tourism revenue. If we want to keep SLO a great place to live, there is a balance to strike and we must embrace the stability and the opportunity, which tourist dollars provide.

MM: We have all seen businesses that struggle with growth. What infrastructure and practices does FAIRWAY have in place to manage its growth that others could learn from?

RC: Collaborate: Recently, we made the decision to partner with a local business-consulting firm (Collaboration, llc). My entrepreneurial instinct was to rely on my own judgment exclusively for strategic direction. I am vigilant about expenses and I was skeptical about working with “consultants”. When we partnered with Collaboration, FAIRWAY experienced accelerated growth. Although we had a well established structure in place predicated on procedures, protocols and systems, Collaboration took us to the next level. Our Management Team’s morale and performance has been steadily increasing through revised structure, greater transparency and sharing of “performance metrics” (revenues, expenses, profitability, etc.). Collaboration’s Worktraits program insures that we make sound hiring decisions and provides a framework to resolve conflicts and foster harmony.

MM: You donate your precious time to supporting student entrepreneurship at Cal Poly to coach the budding entrepreneurs. What drives you to help this noble cause?

RC: I wouldn’t characterize my interest in working with entrepreneurial start-ups as “noble” - it provides an opportunity for excitement and fun: I relish the creative process of collaborative idea generation and refinement. I try to spend as much time as I can with enthusiastic entrepreneurs who are often young (even younger than me!), full of self-confidence (even more confident than me!), unrealistic expectations (even more unrealistic than my own!) who are rife with ground shaking, world changing concepts and ideas!

MM: What big lessons have you learned from the above experience?

RC: I have learnt that I need to exercise greater self-control, listen more and be patient to achieve the most rewarding outcomes. Entrepreneurs are fragile, dynamic and need to count on consistent mentorship and structured collaboration. I live in the moment and sometimes I am inclined to start sharing ideas without processing which is less than thoughtful. I am trying to be more mindful.

MM: What would you advise young people seeking a career path to self-employment particularly in the recreation and food service field?

RC: I think that the challenges in all businesses (including recreation and food service) are generally the same with variations on product, service, etc. I learn everyday, but my advice for a young person with business aspirations, at this moment is:

It is a trap to get caught up in angst and make an impulsive career decision. Your entrepreneurial path will reveal itself if you pursue the engaging things around you that draw you into being. Be generous with everything you have (your things, your time and your ideas) no matter how many times the outcome is a disappointment or you are hurt. Never stop believing in other people and yourself and the certainty that you will succeed if you persist. Process your “failures” as opportunities to refine your experience and your approach to your next solution. Always do what is right in business – it is a myth that you need to “take shortcuts” to get ahead. If you always do what you know is right, you will probably achieve what you hope. If the outcomes of your “business risks” do not pay-off, you will always have the reward of “doing the right thing”. Try to “live in the moment” and allow yourself to be carried away and get caught up with the enthusiasm of the people and ideas around you. Don’t compare yourself to others, be certain that you are too good or work too hard to have competitors. When there are failures or disappointments, it’s probably your fault - blame yourself. Have the courage to pursue new endeavors and take incredible risks (you should do this when you are young and really have nothing to lose). If it’s not fun anymore, have the courage to do something new. If you start your own business, then you are going to regularly experience “end of the world moments”. Don’t “freak out” because everything will probably be ok, unless you “freak out”.

MM: What is the secret to your success?

RC: See last question above.

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