#2: Embrace Technology

There are many ways small business owners can embrace technology in order to grow their business, bring efficiency to operations and reduce cost savings. “There is a lot of technology that is finally accessible to small business,” says Jay Mellon, CEO of AveNetPlus in Stow. "These technologies might not be new in general, but they are certainly becoming relevant for small business this year.” Following are three tech trends to consider in 2015.

1 MOBILE DEVICES. Small businesses are already embracing the BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) trend that simplifies operations and cuts down on costs by allowing employees to use personal smartphones, computers and tablets for company business. The next step is for owners to reduce risk through Mobile Device Management (MDM) platforms. “This trend is becoming an intricate part of small business,” says Mellon. “Because it creates blurred lines between personal and business data, you need a larger mobile strategy. Owners need to create strict policies to secure their business.”

2 CLOUD COMPUTING. “Cloud computing will continue its rapid expansion in small businesses in 2015,” predicts Mellon. The availability of cloud services such as Microsoft Office 365 provides elasticity for businesses and diminishes costly and disruptive changes to hardware capacity. For small businesses, the flexibility and control of cloud storage for e-mail and other productivity software makes a lot of sense. Plus, you pay by usage, so it is easy to upgrade capacity without large out-of-pocket costs.

3 BIG DATA. Big Data (or business intelligence), is the ability to gain additional insight from your current business data to allow you to make better business decisions. From sales forecasting to CRM to inventory control, “Big Data allows you to harness the power of your data to make it 10 times stronger,” says Mellon. “Until recently, you would need a particular expertise to mine this type of data, but the tools are now accessible to small business. Even the latest version of Excel has business intelligence tools built in.” New technology can be a real competitive advantage for business owners savvy enough to embrace it.

HOW CAN I PROTECT MY COMPUTER NETWORK FROM SOCIAL ENGINEERING?

Malware and related IT security threats like Social Engineering — a popular way hackers gain access to a computer network and its sensitive data — continue to increase at alarming rates. It is imperative that businesses take the proper steps to combat these increasingly stealthy threats. Access is often gained through personal e-mail or social networking accounts by enticing employees to click on a link or attachment with juicy tidbits on a current event or celebrity news item. Once an employee clicks on the link, it allows the hacker to load malware onto your network. Malware is malicious software that interferes with normal computer function and can send personal data about the user to unauthorized parties over the Internet.

I recommend implementing multiple layers of defense, kind of like speed bumps, to protect your network from hackers. Anti-virus software offers great protection, but it is just as important to implement strict policies and processes for your employees. Computers are assets of your company as much as a company car or machine tool, so the same rules should apply.

A few safeguards to consider:

- Educate employees on social engineering tactics and defensive measures.
- Install anti-virus software, firewalls, and e-mail filters and update them regularly.
- Set clear protocols on employee computer and technology usage, including rules for accessing personal e-mail and social networking sites. Include protocols in all security and operations manuals.
- Employ a strict password policy that uses a combination of numbers, characters and capitalization and implement mandatory password changes every 60 to 90 days. A full network security audit is also a wise investment to determine what products and processes to put in place to best reduce your vulnerability and protect your business.

STEVE GIORDANO, President TeamLogic IT