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THE PROFESSION

I recently sat down with friends Doug and Sherrill Sleeter, founders of The Sleeter Group. Doug and Sherrill have been married for 27 years and have worked together for nearly 20 of those years.

Darren Root • Jun. 28, 2013

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Darren: Tell me when and why you started The Sleeter Group?

Doug: We started The Sleeter Group in 1994 when QuickBooks (the DOS version) was new in the market and the world was moving towards PC-based accounting software. When we looked at QuickBooks, it was obvious that the ease-of-use would be very attractive to small business owners who were quickly adopting DIY accounting solutions.

We've always been passionate about small business, and helping business owners streamline their processes. We started by building a local consulting practice in the San Francisco Bay area, but quickly discovered that the same questions kept coming up with client after client. So in order to help more clients we set out to teach QuickBooks to accountants, bookkeepers and CPAs who in turn could help clients. That led us to build an international network of professionals that has developed into over 700 professionals who serve over 300,000, small businesses each year. Our members are independent consultants and small to medium-sized accounting firms who focus on small business.

Darren: What has been some of the greatest challenges you have faced in building The Sleeter Group? How about your own internal technology? You're running a business, how aggressively are you pursuing moving to the cloud with your own company?

Doug: Three challenges come to mind. First, it has always been a challenge to focus our efforts where they'll have the most impact; second, finding the right people and resources is always challenging; and third, staying on top of the changing technology innovations and customer demands is a huge challenge. Most likely, our top three challenges are similar for every small business.

Regarding the internal technology issues, we use our own company as our “lab” for

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Today we use a variety of cloud-based products that greatly improve our business. We use Cloud9 Real Time to host our QuickBooks files and other add-ons; we use Bill.com for our paperless A/R, A/P and Cash Management; we have an online payroll service; and we use an outsourced product fulfillment center that ships all of our textbooks to colleges and customers directly. And currently, we’re converting our CRM to Zoho CRM where we can integrate several business processes using Zoho’s suite of over twenty cloud applications. We have two web stores, two web sites, a blog, a central customer database, and a growing number of connections between all of our systems to streamline processes and synchronize data. It’s not perfect yet, but we’re making progress, and as we learn, we write about it, and recommend the great solutions we discover along the way. Our business is an ideal sample company because we sell services, products, memberships, and events, all of which require unique business processes.

Darren: We have discussed on many occasions that you really focus on the end user of technology, the customer of accounting firms or consulting businesses as opposed to focusing on the accounting firm itself, can you explain how you try to make accountants and consultants better by your focus?

Doug: The most-trusted-advisor status should never be taken lightly. We are passionate about helping SMBs succeed by helping them streamline their processes. But the people who are most trusted are the ones who can help them the most. So we focus on helping those most trusted advisors be better at what they do. We believe there are great opportunities for accounting professionals to embrace new business models that include small business technology consulting and business process engineering. Tax and accounting will still lead, but some of the best *new* opportunities for accountants will be in business process consulting. These services are sticky, and involve much deeper client engagement than just tax and accounting.

Darren: For many years you were seen as “the leading QuickBooks Experts”, why

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with commentary and discussion of the most relevant technologies for small business. Several hundred colleges teach from our textbooks published directly and through Intuit's education program.

Our mission is to help accountants and their clients understand what today's technologies can do for them (e.g. QuickBooks Simple Start, Pro, Premier, and Enterprise), but also why and how the new technologies (QuickBooks Online and their competitors such as Xero, Wave, Intacct, and others) matter. We start with helping people sort through the options in the market, and make comparisons about which ones are appropriate for each different type of client.

Darren: The Sleeter Group gives the Awesome Application Awards each Fall, these are products that meet a high standard you set for Accounting Software. How do you go about making these selections each year?

Doug: In addition to exhibiting at our conference, our Awesome Applications program is probably the most effective marketing program for small business application developers. We've helped over 300 software companies get the word out by evaluating their products, consulting with their product managers and engineers, and recognizing their products with our Awesome Application Awards. This not only helps the developers, but also the consultants and accountants who are desperately looking for a credible source of information about solutions worth considering for their clients.

In order to qualify for an Awesome Application Award, an application must be developed by a solid company with a reputation for outstanding customer support, must conform to good accounting principles and operating standards, and should use appropriate transaction types and field population for recording data into the accounting software so as to preserve and/or enhance the standard reporting features.

Darren: As you know, there are lots of products in the tax and accounting

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continuing journey to be the place where SMBs and accountants go to look for solutions.

Darren: QuickBooks Online has been around for several years now, Intuit seems to be investing heavily in making this solution better... how should a practitioner or consultant be positioning themselves and their clients which regards to QBO?

Doug: QBO is definitely one of the solutions accountants should learn about and in many cases recommend to their clients. The product is solid, and quite mature relative to many of the competing online accounting products. QBO had a rough start and many accountants have been wary to take another look, but numerous improvements have been made and we guarantee many more are coming.

In addition to QBO, there are many other products that accountants must educate themselves on. In the past twenty years, QuickBooks has dominated the market, but the cloud completely changes the paradigm for how solutions are developed, marketed, and adopted by users. There is no longer a retail channel that can be controlled by just a few vendors and the world really is “flat” when it comes to developing, marketing, and delivering solutions to small businesses. New products are gaining incredible momentum even though many users have never heard of them before finding them in a Google search. Even Microsoft is finding it very difficult to dominate like they used to because of cloud vendors like Google, FaceBook, Twitter, Pandora, Apple, SalesForce, Yahoo, and Zoho. Each of these companies are having great success, and have been able to reach customers directly on the web, using cloud solutions to compete with the market-dominant desktop applications such as Microsoft Office.

So our advice to accountants is that in order to have a meaningful conversation with your client about the strengths and weaknesses of any particular solution, you need to arm yourself with knowledge about the alternatives. We recommend you focus

less on your ability, and more on your agility. Because your clients will increasingly

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the accounting equivalent to what we've seen with other web-based successes like those mentioned above. We expect to see many more products like Xero, but our bet is that Xero will continue to do very well in the market.

Darren: There's a lot of discussion among many of us about how long desktop software will continue to be relevant, some think just a few more years and others feel the relevance will be around for quite some time, what's your take on the longevity of desktop software?

Doug: We believe that desktop software will only last a few more years, maybe into 2020 or so. But to be honest, we thought it would be dead by 2003 when we saw Netsuite, Intacct, and QBO all those years ago. To be sure, the trend is toward pure SaaS products like those as well as Xero, Wave Accounting, Zoho, Bill.com, and others.

The technology that is extending the life of desktop software is the Windows software hosting business. Companies like Cloud 9 Real Time, Right Networks, and others have done a great job of allowing people to continue using their desktop software in a cloud environment. If it weren't for them, we would predict a much quicker demise of desktop software.

Darren: The Sleeter Group's Accounting Solutions Conference is one of the most popular conferences each year, what are your goals for putting together the conferences...I guess what I'm asking is how do you develop your themes and from there how do you put the conference together?

Doug: Our goal is to arm accountants and consultants serving the small-to medium-sized business market with the skills and tools that drive success. Our annual conference is designed to help accounting professionals become indispensable assets

to their clients by providing deep educational sessions, as well as one-stop shopping

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We develop the conference theme and select our speakers and educational topics by focusing on the relevant topics facing small businesses today and in the near future. We consult with several thought leaders to help design the best mix of technology, business development, and practice innovation topics.

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