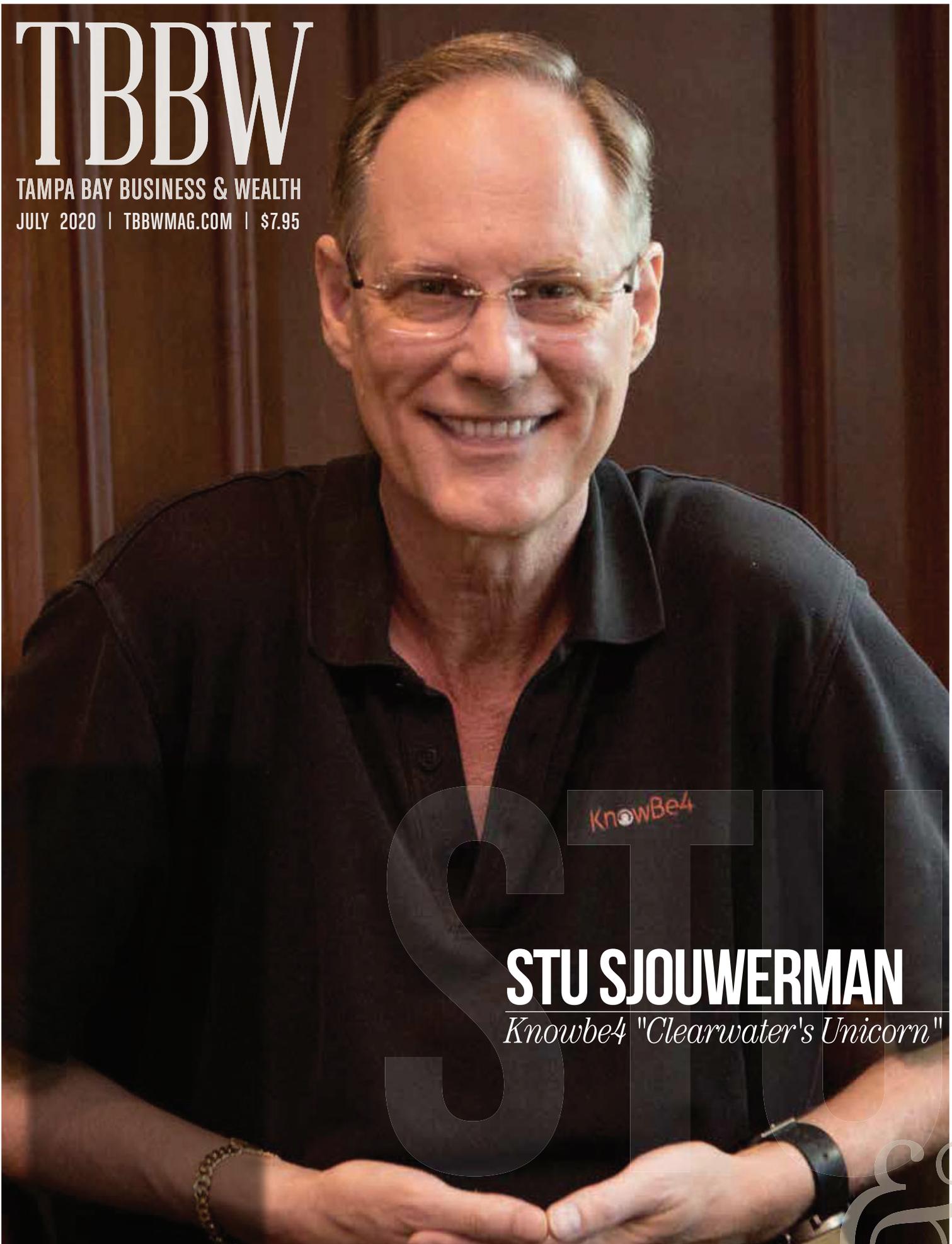


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Leading in a Crisis

TAMPA BAY CONSULTANCY **SHUMAKER ADVISORS** HELP THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY NAVIGATE COVID-19 CRISIS WITH GUIDANCE, RESOURCES AND CONNECTIVITY

BY MICHAEL J. SOLENDER

Navigating the coronavirus' challenges underscores the importance of quality information, guidance and direction in making responsible and effective business decisions. A strong ethos of community service enables Shumaker Advisors Florida to deliver on all these elements, demonstrating how strong government and business relationships facilitate solving complex problems.

"In every crisis or emergency, there's opportunity," says Shumaker Advisors president and CEO, Ron Christaldi. "In the earliest days of the coronavirus, we saw an opportunity to create a 24/7 helpline and reach out into the community with our extensive resource network. This situation reflects precisely why Shumaker Advisors was initially established here."

In March, the firm launched a COVID-19 helpline available at no cost to all callers. With the situation rapidly evolving, questions around issues from criteria in defining businesses as essential and dealing with furloughs, to Paycheck Protection Program application help and understanding CDC guidelines for food service and restaurants workers.



Ronald Christaldi

The helpline fielded calls from a wide variety of industries including manufacturing, health care, construction, finance, nonprofit organizations, landlords, executives and small business owners. In the initial 30 days of operating the helpline, more than 200 calls were taken.

Christaldi, an active participant on area nonprofit boards including Tampa Bay Chamber's board of directors, where he served as past chair, and the Tampa Bay Economic Development Corporation, recognized the importance of both business to business connectivity and business to government relationship

building, as well. He helped launch Shumaker Advisors Florida three years ago as separate government relations/public affairs affiliate of Toledo, Ohio, law firm Shumaker, Loop & Kendrick. The law firm, established in 1925, has seven offices in five states.

"As lawyers [and businessmen and women], we believe we have a responsibility to serve and give back to our community," Christaldi says. "I came to see where we could help others in our community by linking parties with mutual interests and facilitating idea and information exchange." The firm adds value for clients working with them to understand the inner workings of federal, state and local government.

With the current coronavirus landscape, the two-way nature of the firm's relationships is an added benefit for the Tampa Bay community. "Connectivity between our local municipal government and the business community, over stay-at-home orders, is a great example of how we facilitate the exchange of ideas and information," Christaldi said. "Our local sheriff, and county commissioners, reached out in order to get quick feedback to make decisions in an environment that had never presented itself before."

Early on, Christaldi had the opportunity to be part of a discussion, with Vice President Mike Pence, on efforts the federal government was taking in response





Mealnie Griffin

to the virus and share input as to what was happening, on the ground in Florida.

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"It's simply part of the DNA of the firm to be a resource for, and represent the interests of, our community," says Christaldi. He shared a specific example of a local manufacturer who needed help with establishing itself as an "essential business" during the early stages of the shutdown.

"This company makes electronic components for emergency response vehicles," Christaldi says. "And while on the face, it may have been deemed a manufacturing company that likely would have been shut down, and not viewed as an essential business, we helped them to the right government officials so they could explain how their components contributed to EMS vehicles. If they were shut down, they would not be able to provide, and service, these components perhaps leading to a public safety issue."

Given the volume of calls Shumaker Advisors was fielding, the firm saw an opportunity to expand their thought leadership and go beyond the one-on-one

communication of the helpline. "We began to see trends and commonality in questions," Christaldi says. "We worked to synthesize those and publish research and analogize issues to things that happened and what was successful in the past."

The volume of subjects covered, and available, at Shumaker Advisors' website addresses issues from the CARES Act and qualification criteria for PPP loans, to status updates on state-specific unemployment claims and implications of force majeure, a common phrase in contracts that essentially frees both parties from liability or obligation when an extraordinary event or circumstance beyond the control of the parties, such as a war, strike, riot, crime, epidemic or an act of God, prevents one or both parties from fulfilling their obligations of the contract.

Shumaker senior adviser Andy Mayts didn't let Florida's stay-at-home order disrupt his work routine too much. "My home became two university campuses, a yoga studio, my office, my wife's office and a high school classroom," says Mayts, who had his family at home like so many others. "Work was seamless, however, it's amazing what you can get done with an iPhone and a laptop."

Mayts was one of the more than a dozen staff members handling the phones during the hotline's operation. "People crave information during times of uncertainty," he says. "It's very gratifying to provide timely information and help people navigate issues, and situations, that are completely new."

The Paycheck Protection Program presented some unique challenges for many of the callers Mayts spoke with. "People were genuinely gratified the government was stepping up with support but

were concerned about accessing the funds in ways that may have left them with unintended consequences."

Having a front-row seat, as businesses pivoted and shifted their operations in innovative ways was surprising and energizing for many on the hotline team. Senior business adviser Mealnie S. Griffin shared a story about a local tea house that shifted their in-restaurant dining experience to crafting specialty blend tea kits and how the situation led the proprietors to rethink their future approach.

"They've developed an entirely new product line," says Griffin, of the once brick-and-mortar operation now shifting to deliveries. "It's inspiring to see how creative people can be and how we can, not only be responsive to those with concerns, but share inspiration with them as well."

For Christaldi, it's all about demonstrating values that are central to the firm. "Actions like the helpline are at the core of who we are," Christaldi says. "Our community will gain strength from this experience and we'll take learnings and build upon that for a better future." ♦



Andy Mayts