

Entrepreneurial Organization of the Month

CEO Praxis

DeLore Zimmerman, Founder and President

Location:	Grand Forks, North Dakota
Purpose:	CEO Praxis, Inc. is a community and enterprise development company working with entrepreneurs, economic development organizations, and technology research groups to create enterprise opportunities in technology and information industries.
Employees:	3, with additional associates
Founder:	DeLore Zimmerman
Family:	Wife, Sonia, and two children
Education:	Bachelor's degree, University of North Dakota Doctorate, Pennsylvania State University
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The Business of Supporting Businesses – and Communities

Delore Zimmerman runs CEO Praxis, Inc., a community and enterprise development company helping leaders and organizations make strategic decisions affecting their economic well-being. In his website picture, he shares a conservative smile and sports a suit and tie.

You'd never guess that he used to be in rock-n-roll bands.

"Being in a band is a very good experience, not only on the creative side, but also in the areas of business management and group dynamics," said Zimmerman, from his Grand Forks, N.D., office.

Rock bands certainly didn't hurt Zimmerman's business life.

Zimmerman has worked with hundreds of individuals and companies at various stages of business development. Starting as a regional planner in the early 1980s, he co-founded a consulting firm, specializing in rural economic development, in 1986. Since co-founding CEO Praxis in 1994, Zimmerman's company has been awarded seven Small Business Innovation Research awards as well as the Small Business Administration's National Tibbetts award.

Although he plays to an international audience, this former rocker specializes in rural economic issues – harmonizing enterprise and community development.

High-Tech Solutions for Rural Areas

Zimmerman's website defines "praxis" as "performance or application of a skill as opposed to its theory."

CEO Praxis, Inc. provides consultative services in such areas as competitive assessments for communities and regions, creating strategic plans that leverage technology to increase community wealth, and identifying and attracting industries that best use the present work force.

Enterprise services help take advantage of business opportunities for clients in manufacturing, technology, health care, and information industries. These services include strategic and business planning, feasibility studies, market research and strategy, and financing.

Praxis provides services nationwide, but until the last two years, they worked primarily in western states, including their home state of North Dakota. The company focuses on assisting small and medium-sized metropolitan areas – those that were once agricultural but now may be experiencing rapid growth.

"Our main emphasis is on community and economic development," Zimmerman said.

In the Great Plains, this can be a great challenge.

From Sen. Byron Dorgan's (D-N.D.) website: "With the farm economy and population in serious decline, over the past 50 years, hundreds of thousands of people have left small rural counties in search of opportunities elsewhere. And nearly one third of the nation's rural counties have seen at least 10 percent of their population depart for other places – literally decimated by the out-migration of people and jobs."

But Zimmerman's involvement with successful businesses gives him hope. He grew up in rural North Dakota, and the population in his hometown has held steady since he left in the 1970s.

"That's very good," he said. "I used to think being in North Dakota was a problem, primarily due to thin markets, but I've also come to realize that it can be a real plus. Because we (business owners) have to do so much for ourselves, our capabilities can often be richer and have more depth."

Zimmerman is the first to tout the advantages of bringing your business to a rural area.

"People don't understand that we have high tech, high quality stuff going on (in North Dakota)," he said. "We have two research institutions. We have great companies and great managers."

Our thing has always been empowering local entrepreneurs," he added. "I'm not opposed to recruitment (of businesses from elsewhere), but many great companies were born and grew (in North Dakota), such as Bobcat (an engineer, manufacturer and marketer of large equipment)."

But doing business in rural areas may call for different strategies.

For example, Praxis works with a data processing company from Ashley, N.D., called Techlink. A young business, Techlink had exhausted the labor force in their small town, so Praxis helped them expand into a network organization, branching out to the larger city of Dickinson, N.D. In this case, Praxis was also there to help Techlink find partners.

Zimmerman and his team specialize in helping clients incorporate high tech solutions that allow rural businesses to stay alive – and thrive. Praxis worked with a sports jewelry company that expanded to online marketing to penetrate additional markets.

"A fundamental problem in rural areas can be thin markets," Zimmerman said. "We need to be adept at helping business owners find customers in other areas."

Zimmerman said the most satisfying part of his job is working with rural communities that build long-term strategies and stick with them, such as Wanatchee, Wash. Another victim of out-migration, Wanatchee established an empowerment zone and has seen great improvement since 1994, when Praxis stepped in.

More Praxis Projects

Zimmerman and Praxis have quite a few irons in the entrepreneurial fire.

“Our most exciting project lately is helping to coordinate the Red River Valley Research Corridor,” Zimmerman said, referring to an initiative spearheaded by Sen. Dorgan that will help draw millions of Federal research money to North Dakota – specifically to North Dakota State University and the University of North Dakota.

But Zimmerman’s company also coordinates a host of other projects, including the High Performance Community Initiative.

The Center for the New West and CEO Praxis, Inc. jointly developed this initiative to work with progressive communities who need to compete more successfully in the new economy. This era represents globalization, information and intelligence as key resources, entrepreneurship as a driving force and networks as a predominant form of organization, among other prevalent themes. Since 1996 the High-Performance Community Initiative took shape in 15 states.

“What we are always looking for is that undercurrent of economic activity in communities,” Zimmerman said.

He brings forth the case of a small former mining town in Nevada. With 23 engineering firms with world-class expertise in mining, the town had big potential to develop new businesses rich with highly trained engineers. They just needed some help with the transition from an extraction industry to high-tech.

“A real problem rural communities face is that they don’t always understand the new information technology services,” Zimmerman said.

Praxis is also involved in helping businesses and communities find necessary capital through programs such as the Regional Angel Investor Network (RAIN) Funds and the Center of North America Capitol (CONAC) Fund.

RAIN funds are a vehicle for accredited investors to become involved with local companies, while CONAC is a community development venture capital company that invests in early stage and expanding companies.

“What we’ve tried to do is find companies with lots of potential that need money and have exhausted their resources,” Zimmerman said. “We recently helped Earth Harvest Mills, an organic grain mill, by finding \$50,000 for them, which made a huge impact on not only the company, but also the grain growers.”

Another Praxis project piggybacks on Joel Kotkin’s book, *The New Geography: How the Digital Revolution is Reshaping the American Landscape*, widely recognized as a roadmap for cities and regions to become a crossroads for trade, culture and creativity in the new economy.

Zimmerman was increasingly using concepts in Kotkin’s book as he helped communities map out growth strategies, especially in terms of boosting entrepreneurship, retaining and attracting talent and working on quality of life issues.

“A big issue in the quality of life arena is affordable housing,” Zimmerman said, noting that Kotkin’s work indicates that many people on the east and west coasts are moving to the middle of the country for lower housing costs.

Praxis also developed MarketGateway to enable rural enterprises to reach buyers worldwide with information about their products and company capabilities on-line from anywhere, anytime. This project is a website for introducing buyers to industrial and agricultural products.

In towns separated by miles and miles of a rural landscape, technology can make or break a company.

“People often think rural companies are not sophisticated, but that’s not true,” Zimmerman said. “They’ve had to develop markets on their own, and that takes a certain level of knowledge and technical expertise.”

Good Business: Music to your Ears

Zimmerman’s foray into rock music may have prepared him for the creativity – and perhaps the mayhem -- involved in entrepreneurial ventures.

“I like the constant emergence of new opportunities,” he said. “Every day I wake up and there’s a new idea. There is never a dull moment.”

Zimmerman’s job includes various travel and a host of surprises.

“It’s hard to say that there is a typical day, and some days I’m amazed at the people we meet and the projects that often just seem to come our way,” he said. “But we jokingly say sometimes that our work involves months of drudgery, hours of terror and minutes of exhilaration. This is not a field of work for those looking for immediate gratification or certainty.”

But this is a field of work well-suited for Zimmerman.

“My Primary motivation is the thrill of constantly helping people and communities strategize and then mobilize for action,” Zimmerman said. “That’s it for me, the continual innovation and creating the future.”

-By Lisa Bauer, 0404

For more information on...

- ... the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to www.ruraleship.org
- ... CEO Praxis, Inc., go to www.ceopraxis.com
- ... Techlink, go to www.techlink-nd.com
- ... Senator Dorgan’s information on legislation aimed at helping rural North Dakota, go to www.senate.gov/member/nd/dorgan/general/legislation/ndagenda.cfm
- ... Bobcat, go to www.bobcat.com
- ... *The New Geography*, by Joel Kotkin, go to www.joelkotkin.com/Books.htm
- ... MarketGateway, go to www.marketgateway.net