Longing to become an entrepreneur, Tom Steepy did just that on November 21, 2007, when he took over ownership of a Signs Now franchise in Brookfield, Wisconsin. The location was started in 1991. Steepy was fortunate to have an established client base to work with – a major challenge to entrepreneurs starting out.

Steepy hadn’t considered franchising prior to coincidentally meeting a franchise broker and managing partner of The Entrepreneur’s Source in Milwaukee. The two met at a Boomer Conference hosted by the Career Transitions Center (CTC) at UW-Milwaukee’s School of Continuing Education. He offered the one-on-one, unbiased support and guidance Steepy sought, especially with regard to selecting a franchisor. Steepy liked Signs Now’s franchise business model, fee structure, the support Signs Now’s headquarters offered, and their responsiveness. After contacting other Signs Now owners, his sentiments were affirmed; he sensed the Signs Now franchisor was deeply concerned with individual success for its franchisees.

There were obstacles for Steepy to overcome. He spent the better part of his career in management at manufacturing companies. While he possessed business skills applicable to that business, he knew he had learning to do.

Once he heard about UW-Milwaukee’s Small Business Development Center (SBDC), also through the CTC’s Boomer Conference, Steepy began his journey by enrolling in coursework to build his business skills. A specific concern Steepy had included understanding and implementing successful sales and marketing tactics. He was lucky to have a client base and franchisor support, but it would still be his charge to grow the business. Even so, clients can be wary of ownership change in a business with which they’re familiar. As a result, Steepy found meeting with existing clients challenging. He assured them by conveying, “I bought the business to enhance it, not simply change it.”

Steepy enrolled in SBDC’s Strategic Marketing Series and Financial Management Series to build essential skills in operating a business. Before that, Steepy attended each of SBDC’s courses intended for those starting a business: Exploring Entrepreneurship, First Steps to Entrepreneurship, and the Entrepreneur Training Program (ETP). During all courses, and especially ETP with its weekly expert guest speakers, Steepy found tremendous value in the outside, objective, practical and real world experiences being shared. “These were experienced individuals working in the ‘real world’ with lessons and advice to share, willing to help individuals with a similar entrepreneurial spirit.”

Another lesson Steepy is learning in his new endeavor is the value of networking. He’s hoping to enroll himself and his four employees in a sales class at some point to be more diligent generating sales in a seasonal industry. His advice to others interested in owning their own business: find a mentor or coach who will listen to your ideas, network, and educate yourself in operating a business. Steepy has also become a proponent of franchising. Reaching out to other owners in other locations is of tremendous value.

The future looks bright for Tom Steepy’s Signs Now business. He continues to focus on growing the business. He’s eager to continue learning and growing the business, providing all types of signage products to the market. The SBDC is excited to have helped Tom Steepy and his business, Signs Now – “Stand Out in a Crowded World” and looks forward to his continued success.