

## MAIN LINE TODAY

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### FRONTLINE: 60 Seconds

By Dawn E. Warden



#### Author/columnist Gene Marks

A penny-pinching columnist for the *Philadelphia Business Journal* and the self-proclaimed "world's worst CPA," Merion Station's **Gene Marks** has a thing for lists. You will too after you meander through his 661-page *Streetwise Small Business Book of Lists* (Adams Media)—the ultimate resource for getting the biggest bang for your buck. Leave a copy on your boss' desk—you'll either look like a genius or get ousted in a cost-cutting move. If you're banking on genius status, then don't forget to earmark page 634: the world shall be your oyster.

#### MLT: What was the impetus for the book?

**GM:** I run a 10-person company and I'm compulsive about obtaining optimum efficiency.

#### MLT: How much of the information is rooted in mistakes made by you or others in your company?

**GM:** All of it. I've made mistakes when buying cell phones, fax machines, even software and hardware. I didn't ask enough questions. Other things, too—we were in violation of a zillion things. There's a lot of rules and terminology out there that small businesses aren't aware of—like knowing when a subcontractor is really an employee.

#### MLT: Dollar-wise, what defines a small business?

**GM:** This is definitely a gray area—even Amex and Microsoft characterize "small business" differently. Personally, I define a small business as that with 250 employees or less. Profits don't really come into play.

#### MLT: What's the biggest challenge small businesses face?

**GM:** Finding good people. Smaller businesses have a hard time competing in terms of benefits and salary. It's so easy to do things remotely or outsourcing beyond the U.S. for less.

#### MLT: Of the top 10 reasons to keep this book on your desk, which is the most important?

**GM:** Fast answers. Here's a scenario: Your fax machine breaks and you have to run out at lunch and buy a new one. You have no idea whether you should get a \$100 machine or a \$500 one, what kind of paper to get, etc. With the lists, you just go to the back of the book, look up fax machines in the index and it's all there—researched by experts.

#### MLT: Should my brother-in-law invest in my business?

**GM:** My personal advice is to avoid financially involving family members, unless you're very close to them.

#### MLT: What's the book's appeal for non-traditional/non-business types?

**GM:** My mom helped me out on the book, editing, etc. Her complaint was that it was only being marketed to small business. A lot of the information is for home-based and self-employed companies, especially the tax stuff. But on the technology and buying side, every household uses stuff like printers, anti-virus software, faxes. Much of what is in the book applies to individuals as well as companies.

#### MLT: How challenging was the research phase of the book?

**GM:** Actually, it's a great story: I hired Villanova and St. Joe's students to come up with as many lists as they could think of, find "experts" on those subjects, then compile the information. I got nearly 1,500 ideas, but only had room for 500. I sell software; I'm not an expert on that many things. I only did 10 lists in the book.