

From the Austin Business Journal

[:http://www.bizjournals.com/austin/stories/2004/03/08/focus1.html](http://www.bizjournals.com/austin/stories/2004/03/08/focus1.html)

The value of friendship

Business owner Kip Piper gains insight, introspection from husband's illness, death

Mar 7, 2004, 11:00pm CST Updated: Mar 4, 2004, 10:41am CST

Rob Curran

Special to the Austin Business Journal

Over the past two years, Kip Piper has discovered that small businesses have one indispensable asset: friends.

"Even with this high tech Internet business, it's the person-to-person relationships that made the difference [in] this business surviving," Piper says.

When doctors gave Piper's husband, Pat, months to live in September 2002, Kip didn't want to stray one moment from his side. Yet somebody had to tend to their Web site development business, Austin-based MTC Interactive Inc.

"Other companies you can get time off and sick leave and paid vacation," says Korey Howell, owner of Austin Area Graphic Design in Cedar Park. "There's no such thing when you work for yourself."

Around the time her husband died, Piper took time off from the business. She has kept MTC Interactive alive as his legacy.

She has learned some lessons she can pass along to other businesses that find themselves in similar situations:

- Be prepared. Learn all sides of the business so the secrets don't die with the business operators.
- Attend networking functions.
- Form alliances with suppliers and competitors.
- Have friends who know firsthand what running a small business entails.

"Most people and businesses -- which are made of people -- are resilient. They get through these things," says Bruce Blythe, CEO of Atlanta-based Crisis Management International Inc.

"Most people and businesses grow in some ways -- if it doesn't kill you, you typically grow. [Piper is] looking at systems that can be replicated. She's saying we need to get this stuff done now for the survival of the company, and that's a good thing."

Business always had been pleasurable for Kip Piper and her husband.

Kip says she studied music at the Shenandoah Conservatory "until I realized I was too much of a capitalist." She eventually graduated from James Madison University.

During the 1980s, she worked for Pat Piper, an attorney at the U.S. Department of Justice who owned a company that operated vans around the Washington, D.C., area. For more than four years, Kip drove one of those vans between her hometown in Northern Virginia and D.C.

Kip and Pat's friendship flourished after he separated from his first wife and he joined a law firm in Dallas. When Kip moved to Austin in the early 1990s, Pat followed and they soon wed.

"We could finish each other's sentences," Kip says.

"We wouldn't talk for a time, then we'd both open our mouths and say the same thing. We were one of those rare [couples who] could work together in the same room all day long and still be speaking to one another in the evening."

In 1993, they were working together again, this time for MTC Publishing, the company they founded to feed a mutual interest in writing, printing and graphic design.

After several clients advised them to look into "this Internet thing," MTC Publishing gradually evolved into MTC Interactive with a concentration on Web site development and on marketing sites through search engines. The newlyweds learned the markup languages by copying code from sites that they liked.

During the Internet heyday, they were designing sites for the University of Texas and Advanced Micro Devices Inc. from a rented office with the help of about 20 subcontractors -- programmers, computer artists and graphic designers.

"They had a partnership," says Barbara Metzger, owner of Austin's CEO Network and consulting firm Maximize. "He did a lot of the sales type stuff, and he knew computers. She did a lot of design work. They each had their own strengths."

Blythe, author of *Blindsided: A Manager's Guide to Catastrophic Incidents in the Workplace*, says people in strong, successful businesses such as MTC rarely discuss a contingency plan for when a key person dies.

"Businesses do not want to think about things like the key operator dying -- it's the same syndrome as people who hesitate to buy life insurance," Blythe says.

Now, Kip is preparing her company for every risk.

Pat carried much of the administrative and computer know-how around in his head. Kip now realizes she knew only the design end of the business.

She has discovered that procedure manuals provide a handrail for walking newcomers through a company. Without a record of Pat's knowledge, Kip has walked tightropes such as trying to get the computers to talk to one another without the necessary passwords.

Today, she is building MTC's records so that important facets of the company's operations are somewhere outside her head.

"It's so much easier to sell a healthy operating business that is turnkey," she says.

When Pat weakened as he started chemotherapy for prostate cancer in the late 1990s, MTC continued as usual. The couple had to work weekends. Once a week, they would travel to the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston for Pat's treatment. The next day, Pat would rest.

"The only time it was tough was when he had to go to hospital for ... six, seven days," Kip says. "Then, everything stopped."

But Pat still ran his own networking group, the National Business Exchange, for local small businesses and they both attended CEO Network lunches every Tuesday. The Pipers threw parties for relatives, networking friends and customers.

Thanks to Pat's emphasis on the personal touch, MTC had become an integral part of people's lives.

"I have clients who call me and say, 'My elbow hurts' or 'The dog's sick, do you know a holistic vet?'" Kip says.

In September 2002, Pat's health deteriorated. Doctors warned time was running out.

The CEO Network's Metzger says she knew Pat had a history of poor health and warned Kip that he would die quickly. Metzger called Kip every day to remind her of tasks that had to be done.

Metzger "was my brain for weeks before and weeks after Pat died," Kip says.

Pat died Sept. 30, 2002.

Kip says she freed herself to grieve only because Metzger and other friends kept MTC afloat. Networking friends such as Howell organized fundraisers and became her "unofficial board of directors."

Bob Richards, owner of Black Lab Internet, an Austin-based Web hosting service, was another friend Pat and Kip made through networking. Richards says he "did a bunch of little work for her" free of charge during the toughest weeks. He changed phone numbers on Web sites and fielded small problems for any MTC clients he hosted on his server.

Richards says Kip since has directed several major projects to his company.

Blythe, the crisis management expert, says: "When I went through boot camp in the Marines, we got pretty close because you go through a challenge together. When the group has a very emotionally trying time together, that tends to be bonding. You get on an emotional level instead of a 'neck up, let's talk about goals' [level]."

Howell, whose Austin Area Graphic Design firm theoretically is an MTC competitor, took care of Kip's customers while she was grieving and sent business Kip's way as soon as she was back on her feet.

"The fact that she kept going was amazing," Howell says. "I think I would just pack up and go home to live with mother. She realized that she had enough friends and colleagues that if we just took her in for a day each, she'd be OK."

Piper and Howell still are looking out for one another -- whether referring clients or giving each another tips on fonts. Kip prioritizes friendship in her business more than ever and has taken over running the National Business Exchange, the networking group Pat had led.

Another major change in Piper's business life is what she calls a "passive income stream." In case MTC ever encounters a rocky period again, she will receive a monthly check from Austin-based children's Internet watchdog Kids Internet World Explorer as the company's new marketing director.

"Looking back, I am astounded that I survived that horrible time with my sanity, soul and business intact," Kip wrote recently.

"I am a better person -- and MTC Interactive is a stronger business -- for having done so. And next time I get blindsided by another of life's troubles some idle afternoon, maybe, just maybe, I'll be a little better prepared."

ROB CURRAN is an Austin-based freelance writer.