

On the job with...

Timothy Askew

CEO

Corporate Rain, Inc.



Timothy Askew is the CEO of Corporate Rain Inc., a New Rochelle, N.Y.-based

outsourcing boutique that provides companies with contract rainmakers. His firm handles the "pre-sell"--identifying decision makers and initiating contacts and relationships with them--through calls that are "engaging, never scripted" and customized mailings. CRI claims a high success rate, translating at least 10% of new contacts into appointments. Its client list includes companies such as American International Group, Avaya, Grey Advertising and TheStreet.com. Wendy Blake talks with Mr. Askew about the secrets of his success.

Crainsny.com: *How did the company get started?*

Timothy Askew: Being a businessman was the last thing I thought I'd ever become. I actually started out with a vague idea of becoming a social worker or a teacher or a minister. In my youth, I got a B.A. in history, an M.A. in philosophy, and an M.A. in education. All of this happened before I was 23 and left me indecisive and unprepared for any real career I could discern. So naturally I decided to get a Ph.D.

For the next 25 years, I held a series of jobs and attempted a number of careers. I dropped out of my Ph.D. program, I washed dishes, I was assistant dean of students at Harvey Mudd College in California, I was a bartender, I was an event planner, and I was a tennis pro. For a few years, I was an actor and actually did a couple of Broadway shows and was on the soap opera *Another World*. However, mostly I collected unemployment. I tried unsuccessfully to become an opera singer. Finally, I lost a ton of money trying to be a Broadway producer. If you were unkind, you might describe me as a serial failure.

However, out of all this came the beginnings of my corporate rainmaking company. I had met some CEOs when I was failing as a producer, and one asked me if I'd like to do a personal sales project for him. I did, and to my amazement I did a very effective job.

I did more freelance sales work and began to see that there was a clear demand for an elite sales outsourcing company in New York. I also recognized the trend for executives to work from their home offices and wanted to create a company where people could set their own schedules and create a more balanced work-life style. So I started Corporate Rain Inc. in 1996, with myself as owner and sole employee.

Crainsny.com: *Some of your associates also have unusual backgrounds. What do you look for when hiring?*

Timothy Askew: I hire people like myself. I look for older people who have advanced education, broad-ranging life experience, compassion for themselves and others, and people who understand business. These people have very good business skills and experience but for one reason or another don't fit comfortably into corporate life. They are not conventional people, but they are very authentic people.

My executive vice president, Brad Smith, has a B.S. degree in premedical studies and completed master's work in biochemistry. For three years, he served as a missionary in Zimbabwe, working to end apartheid. Subsequently, after two years of directing a charitable fund, he became a modern dancer and attended the Art Students League of New York full-time. On the side, he teaches the Alexander technique. About six years ago, he started to work with me and has initiated many millions in sales.

David DeBeck, vice president of our Northeast region, is a stage director, film producer and occasional actor. He has also served as an elected union negotiator. Karen Kachele, vice

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- **See yourself as a servant of your client**

president of our medical division, is a former ballerina for the Joffrey Ballet. She has been president of a medical placement firm and is a Pilates trainer. One of our associates supervised a staff of 20 at a publishing house before a traffic accident left her handicapped; she now works for CRI out of her home office. Another is a former sales executive at GE, who now owns a trout farm and designs jewelry in addition to working for CRI.

Crainsny.com: *How does your company function?*

Timothy Askew: I run a virtual office, so each of my 40 sales associates' works out of his or her own home office and manages his or her own hours. My associates contract with Corporate Rain on either a freelance or employee basis to initiate rainmaking for our clients.

Crainsny.com: *What are the challenges of running a decentralized operation?*

Timothy Askew: A constant problem is maintaining enough systemic control while not intruding on the creativity and passion of the associates who work for us. We have a full-time technologist and a five-person central office support staff as well as a detailed procedures manual. Most of our meetings are virtual.

To tell you the truth, our company is probably as close to a communist company as you will find in corporate America. We are an association of equals. That said, we are a successful, prosperous, capitalist enterprise. I truly never add anyone to our staff that doesn't seem as good as or better at selling than me.

We are a company of kick-a** generalists who practice high-

level corporate sales as an art form.

Crainsny.com: *Can you share some of your trade secrets?*

Timothy Askew:

- Care about other people. Don't pretend to care about people. Really care about people.
- Always tell the truth. People will respond to authenticity. (If you can't tell the simple truth about your company, find another company that you can tell the truth about.) Sales are not about fooling people or manipulation.
- See yourself as a servant of your client and their potential client. CRI's ethos and business model are closer to a social worker's or a minister's than to the normal American corporation's.

Crainsny.com: *How is your company faring in this tough economy?*

Timothy Askew: The recession has been great for CRI. We offer an executive sales solution that reduces our clients' employment costs and still provides them with high-level employees on a flexible basis, without the expense and risk of in-house hires.

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