

STARTING YOUR BUSINESS » KNOWLEDGE-BASED FIRMS



'I wanted to be in a position to work differently than how a traditional lawyer would work,' explains lawyer Laura Zizzo, left, speaking with Johanna Hoffmann of Oomph Group Inc. JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Ready, set, thrive: How to successfully work alone

A young lawyer passionate about climate-change law meets a savvy marketing expert to discuss how best to run her company

BY ANGELA KRYHUL

Laura Zizzo is breaking new ground as a lawyer and an entrepreneur. In July she opened her own practice specializing in environmental and climate-change law. The twist is that in addition to legal advice, Ms. Zizzo is providing climate-change consulting and advisory services.

"The legal profession is changing from lawyers who just provide legal advice to lawyers who understand a client's context and can [offer] consulting," Ms. Zizzo explains. "I wanted to be in a position to work differently than how a traditional lawyer would work."

Ms. Zizzo earned a bachelor of science degree in environmental studies in 2004 from the University of Waterloo. She studied law at the University of Toronto and was called to the bar in 2008. After a year as an associate at Toronto law firm Gowling Lafleur Henderson LLP, where she spent most of her time working in environmental law, Ms. Zizzo, 27, struck out on her own this past summer so that she could be completely immersed in environmental and climate-change law.

Operating under the name Zizzo Climate Law as a sole practitioner, Ms. Zizzo needs basic advice on how to set up and market her business.

She sat down with Johanna Hoffmann, president of Toronto-based Oomph Group Inc. Ms. Hoffmann, an entrepreneur who has managed four of her own companies over the past 20 years including a successful public relations and marketing agency, advises the owners of professional and knowledge-based firms on how to avoid common business pitfalls. Ms. Hoffmann conducts workshops on topics ranging from people management and operations to marketing communications and financial systems and management.

SETTING UP THE BUSINESS

Ms. Zizzo operates her business from home and rents a desk in the Centre for Social Innovation building in Toronto where she has access to boardroom space.

Ms. Zizzo is playing it smart, Ms. Hoffmann says, by keeping her overhead to a minimum until she builds steady workflow and revenues and she has a credible venue where she can meet clients. Ms. Hoffmann also suggests that sole practitioners eventually consider incorporation to take advantage of better tax rates and to protect their personal assets against liabilities.

Ms. Zizzo has a good idea of how much money is coming into and out of the practice every month, but she hasn't established a budget or a bookkeeping system. Entrepreneurs need to get a handle on their numbers early in order to avoid costly bookkeeping mistakes, and so that they know how much to charge to cover expenses and earn a comfortable living, Ms. Hoffmann explains.

Ms. Zizzo needs both a bookkeeper and an accountant who understand consulting and legal practice because, as a lawyer, Ms. Zizzo is required to have separate trust accounts for each of her clients, Ms. Hoffmann adds.

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Ms. Zizzo should seek out specific advice, including talking to the Law Society of Upper Canada, on how to run a consultancy and a law practice simultaneously, says Ms. Hoffmann, who thinks Ms. Zizzo may have to set up two separate businesses.

CHECK LIST:

- » Contact Canada Revenue Agency to register your Business Number and GST/HST accounts.
- » Canadabusiness.ca has lots of information about starting a business.
- » If you're operating a home-based business, talk to an insurance broker about what's not covered by homeowners' insurance.

TARGET MARKETS

Company or brand positioning is all about communicating the value and benefits a client will receive, but Ms. Zizzo is struggling to articulate how her firm helps organizations identify and manage risks and opportunities related to climate change.

It may help to write a 25-word mission statement that clearly identifies what a company does, for whom and the value it brings to the table, Ms. Hoffmann says. "Most professionals have difficulty arriving at their positioning because most of them do exactly the same thing as their competitors."

Entrepreneurs also need to anticipate shifts in the market by not putting all of their eggs in one basket. If you identify between two and four target markets, Ms. Hoffmann explains, "in the event of an economic, regulatory or a political change, you do not all of a sudden find yourself without a single client."

Ms. Hoffmann suggests that Ms. Zizzo target established industries, such as oil and gas, that must deal with environmental issues; large organizations that want to act as good corporate citizens by undertaking community betterment projects; and clean technology companies. Ms. Zizzo has also identified the engineering and architectural fields as potential users of her services.

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Within each of her four targets, Ms. Zizzo would identify five key companies. This exercise will produce at least 20 firms she can start approaching for work over the next year, Ms. Hoffmann says.

CHECK LIST

- » Write a positioning statement that articulates the value of your service.
- » Carefully choose the name of your firm. Avoid naming your firm after yourself if you eventually want to sell the business.

MARKETING

The marketing for Zizzo Climate Law consists of business cards and a website which features a podcast and a blog. Ms. Zizzo is networking like crazy at environment-related events but wants to know how to go from "we're connected, we're on the same page, to actually getting work." She has accumulated hundreds of business cards.

Ms. Zizzo is very strategic in her big-picture approach to her practice, but she's being overwhelmed by the details associated with networking, Ms. Hoffmann says. She needs to start moving in the same circles as the corporate decision makers employed by her 20 targeted companies "because that is where her work is going to come from, far more than other young people who are passionate about climate change," Ms. Hoffmann says. "You need to weed out all the time-consuming activities. You've got to be surgical about it, you don't have a choice."

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Public speaking is one of the most efficient and effective ways to get your name in front of potential clients, Ms. Hoffmann advises. Ms. Zizzo needs a speaker's profile outlining her expertise and a list of five topics she can offer as educational workshops and keynote presentations to her targeted industry associations.

CHECK LIST

- » Create a website for your business. If cost is an issue, set up a blog for free in Google Blogger or WordPress.
- » Invest in a customer relationship management database, such as salesstrakr.com or zoho.com, to keep track of contacts.

JUGGLING ACT

Although her practice is only a few months old, Ms. Zizzo is already feeling consumed by the day-to-day management of the business.

That's not unusual, Ms. Hoffmann comments. Many professionals hang out a shingle because they're passionate about their work, but they often find they're spending more time as office manager and salesperson.

The key is to delegate some of the management and routine tasks to employees or contract workers. "If you don't plan it, you will wake up one day with a very successful practice, but, for a long time, you haven't done any work that you love," Ms. Hoffmann says. "Never lose sight of what you love to do so that you can make room for that."

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Ms. Zizzo should hire an assistant or intern to take care of routine tasks such as entering business cards into a database so that she can devote her time to high-value, billable tasks.

CHECK LIST

- » Keep track of your billable and non-billable hours using online time tracking and invoicing software such as Freshbooks.com