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'My Gal Friday finds flying solo worth the risk

Mary Morgan

“Once upon a time, I made a list of all the things I knew how to do,” Sharon McRill states in a brochure for her business. “After some growing pains and lots of planning, My Gal Friday was created.”

Sounds simple, right? And for those of us who fantasize about starting our own business, we want to believe it's that strait forward: Think of an idea, then make it happen.

But like most entrepreneurs, Sharon's saga is far more complicated – and interesting- than two sentences can capture. And her journey provides a model, of sorts, on how to get a small business off the ground.

My Gal Friday is a concierge business, doing errands and tasks that range from picking up your dry cleaning to cleaning out and organizing your basement. It's part of a growing service industry, and captures within that sector a niche created by our frenetic lives.

The Ann Arbor home-based firm also belongs to the growing ranks of small business owners who leave corporate America to chase the dream of owning their own company. But while autonomy is alluring, reality can be a shock.

“I'd had experience working at small and large business,” Sharon said. “But until I started doing it myself, I had no idea.”

“Now I make all the decisions, which is overwhelmingly daunting and scary – all those things,” she added. “At the same time, it's very empowering and cool and exciting.”

Getting Started

By the mid-1990's, Sharon had found her perfect job. After spending several years working in retail, she landed a corporate job with Borders Group online business where she reviewed movies, helped determine content for the website, interviewed celebrities and wrote articles for the company's internal magazine.

“I loved my job,” she said.

Then, in 2001, the Ann Arbor bookseller inked a deal with Amazon.com to run its website, dismantling its own online division and laying off or finding other jobs for those 150 or so workers, including Sharon.

She found other work, but nothing she did to make ends meet seemed like a good long-term fit. Meanwhile, she’d started doing odd jobs for friends and family on the weekends: painting kitchens, organizing cluttered rooms, doing yard work.

“People would say, ‘You could do this for a living,’” Sharon recalled.

She agreed.

She made a list, not just of things she could do, but also of tasks she enjoyed. Cleaning didn’t make the cut. Pet care was an afterthought, though now it accounts for 40 percent of her business.

Using how-to books and her own experience – her parents and grandparents ran their own small businesses – she devised a business plan in early 2003.

She had \$10,000 in Borders stock that she’d planned to use as a down payment for a house. Instead, it turned into seed money she hoped would stretch to cover a year’s worth of expenses. Beyond that was anyone’s guess.

She settled on a name: My Gal Friday alludes to the 1940 Cary Grant movie “His Girl Friday” and it evokes the quaint “gal Friday” expression that refers to someone who’s your trusted assistant.

She registered her business name with the county clerk, for a \$10 fee.

She got business cards. Her first batch had no logo, just her company’s name and her cell number. “They were those crappy cards that you get and say, ‘Oh my god – you work out of our house, don’t you?’”

And she networked. And networked some more – strategically.

For several hundred dollars in dues, Sharon joined the Washtenaw Referral Network, a group that does pretty much what it says it will. She shelled out about \$300 to join the Ann Arbor Area Chamber of Commerce and she joined the Women’ Business Owners of Southeast Michigan for roughly \$50.

She later joined the Better Business Bureau (good for its brand recognition, she said, but useful for little else) and the Ann Arbor Convention & Visitors Bureau, which

puts out a list each month of local events coming to the area – including weddings and reunion parties – with contact info that’s been helping in getting business, Sharon said.

Elizabeth Jones heard about My Gal Friday through mutual friends. Jones, a vice president with Quicken Loans/Rock financial in Livonia, lives in Ann Arbor and uses the small firm’s services weekly. She’s also called on Sharon for special situations – staying at her home to wait for a cable TV service person, for example. And one time, when Jones arrived at Detroit Metro airport and realized she’d forgotten her driver’s license at home but didn’t have time to retrieve it before her flight left, she called Sharon and asked her to go pick it up.

“Forty-five minutes later, she was pulling up to the airport,” Jones said. “I tipped her extra for that. There’s a level of convenience and comfort that’s worth the cost.”

Growing up

As her business grew, Sharon started putting together a support group of professionals.

She’d been working on a handshake until a client bounced a large check – causing other checks to bounce and piling on fees. Knowing she needed to get clients to sign contracts before she started a job, Sharon contacted Julie Kruze, an Ann Arbor attorney who specializes in small businesses.

Though she does her daily bookkeeping using QuickBooks software, Sharon needed an accountant to provide some extra handholding – someone to say “you need to increase cash flow by x dollars per month to hit your numbers.” She hooked up with local accountant Gary Hessenaur, who also focuses on small-business clients.

Hessenaur, who’s active in the local business community, said one of the smartest things Sharon has done is to put together an advisory board for her business.

Consisting of people who have some connection to Sharon’s business – her accountant, her attorney, her insurance agent – as well as others who bring experience to bear in some way, the group meets once a quarter to get a progress report and give advice. They talk about marketing strategies, approaches to improving cash flow, issues related to hiring and managing multiple employees as her business grows.

For their time, Sharon buys them dinner.

Jim Libs, head of the local insurance agency Mundus & Mundus, serves on my Gal Friday's advisory board and said it's a very uncommon move for a business her size. He said the advisers also get something out of the experience.

"It's kind of exciting to see someone who wants to grow her business and has such a passion for it," Libs said.

For Sharon, the payoff is more concrete.

"It creates a discipline that she needs to report to us once a quarter," Hessenaur said. "And it's good to work out the bugs while she's small."

She might not stay small for long. Earlier this year, Sharon hired her first employee – Marie Sassano, a former My Gal Friday client who wanted flexible hours and didn't mind the sporadic nature of the work. She hired a second worker this summer.

"The hardest thing is letting go," Sharon said, "letting them take care of things you might do a different way."

Having employees, while necessary for growth, also adds an extra layer of complication on the business, including issues like workers compensation and payroll. But more critically, Sharon believes, is the importance of making the right hires – a make-or-break decision for a service business like hers.

Business is about relationships, Sharon said. And for My Gal Friday, those relationships often hinge on taking care of the details. "Really, people don't need us – we're a luxury item," she said. "So if we're messing up on the small things, why would they keep us?"

Next steps

Sharon has ambitious plans for her business, hoping eventually to franchise the concept.

But her shorter-term goal is simpler: to move My Gal Friday out of her apartment's dining room and into an office. That would add significant overhead costs to her business, and might require taking out a loan. One alternative is to buy a house that has a garage or some other place to convert into an office, so she's on the hunt for that.

Meanwhile, she's struggling to find a "life balance" so she won't be totally consumed with the business. And as she adds employees, she hopes to find a way to offer basic benefits, like health insurance.

As with many businesses, health insurance, namely her own – is the firm’s highest monthly expense. And it’s the thing she misses most about her corporate past.

But she doesn’t regret her decision. And she recently clinched an affirmation that she’s on the right track, winning the 2004 Outstanding Business Growth award from the Women Business owners of Southeast Michigan.

“It was a terrifying prospect (to start the business),” Sharon said. “I’m going to put myself out there. I’m going to put my savings out there. What if I fail?”

But perspective is crucial and one comforting thought has helped.

“Dumber people than me have done it,” she quips. “What’s the worst that can happen?”

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Advising My Gal

Sharon McRill, owner of My Gal Friday, formed an advisory board of local professionals to guide the company. The group meets every quarter for dinner and gives tips to help the small business as it grows. “I was terrified to ask them” Sharon recalls. “Why would they give me their time?” She’s very glad she did.

They are:

Diane Durance, Ann Arbor IT Zone (formerly president of Home Run Services)

Gary Hessenaur, Hessenaur & Associates

Ron Hingst, PR Services

Julie Kruze, Law Practice of Reed & Kruze

Jim Libs, Mundus & Mundus

Gerry Mangona, Edward Jones

Barb Shoffner, Ann Arbor Area Chamber of Commerce

Brandy Telfer, TCF Bank