

On my own

Starting an agency in the new millennium



Tobe Gerard

Giving birth to a new business is in many ways like giving birth to a child. A tremendous amount of energy goes into the preparation for the birth and then one day he or she is born. The excitement is at an all time high with so many firsts to live through and wonder at.

Starting my own business in 2000 was once again all about "firsts": my first shipment of business checks, my first logo, my first client, my first commission check. I rode that excitement for at least six months and then reality hit and it struck hard; the economy had changed dramatically. Many of my prospective clients, reasonably affluent people who were ready to buy long term care insurance, were now delaying purchase due to their dwindling portfolios. I had been out on my own for less than a year and my world had turned upside down. I wasn't sure if my business was kaput before I had really gotten started.

Fast forward two years and not only am I'm still here to tell you my story but I am thriving in this new world. How did I do it? What was it like? What should you know as you consider venturing out on your own?

- Be willing to work harder and longer than you've ever worked before in your life. That is not an understatement. Working for yourself is not like any other kind of work you've ever done. There's no one to check in with or set out the day's workflow for you. You've got to be highly motivated internally. If you are a low energy person by nature, owning your own business just will not work. Had I not been the daughter of an outside salesman I would have thrown in the towel by the end of the first year. But Dad always said that just getting out of bed in the morning puts you ahead of half of the other sales people out there. Which leads me to #2...
- Make sure that you've got a healthy dose of self-esteem.

Owning your own business is all about soaking up the kudos on the great days; the days when all of your clients are approved preferred and your best prospects return your phone calls and want to set up appointments. But it's also about the bad days; the days when the APS on your new female client reveals low bone density, signifying osteoporosis, or your other new client's accountant tells him he doesn't need long term care insurance. Without strong self-esteem (and market knowledge) you will not be able to recover from hits like this.

- Make sure that you have at least one, but preferably a few mentors. It is not an easy task to find mentors today in the business world. In today's busy world, most professionals barely have time to run their own businesses let alone help someone new learn to walk the walk and talk the talk. I still don't have many mentors, but they are my treasure people for they each taught me something that led to my success.
- Make sure that your income comes from more than one revenue stream. When I started my business, I was absolutely positive that all I needed to do was partner with the P&C agents that I had called on for 20 years in my prior job. That was a grave error in judgment on my part. These agents were already very busy in their own businesses putting out fires that ranged from insurance company problems to employee concerns. I needed to work hard to convince them that I could add thousands of dollars to their bottom line with very little work to them.
- Partner with other professionals who have the same target market as you. Network among your professional peers. Not only network but take on visible roles. The networking path I chose allowed me to step up, take on one lead-

ership role after another until I was overseeing a whole geographic region. It involved a lot of my personal time and effort, but I have reaped the rewards. Partnering with professionals such as estate and elder law attorneys, accountants, life insurance agents, investment advisors, financial planners, as well as my own tried and true P&C agents brought about the stream of referrals I was seeking. I learned that growing my business was as much about who I knew as it was about what I knew.

- Learn how to write an effective business letter. I set out on a letter writing campaign of 10 letters a week to different professionals whose offices were within about a half hour radius of my business. This letter served as an introduction of my “long term care” specialty and me. I followed up with a phone call asking for a few minutes of their time. My goal was to provide them information about the issue of long term care and the insurance products available to meet that risk. These introductory meetings have led to many satisfactory sources of referrals. I refer to this time period as the “meeting and greeting” stage of my business development. I rehearsed what I thought they might ask me and practiced what I would answer.
- Seek out speaking opportunities. When I first started my business, I contacted all of the local councils on aging. I suggested that I “train” their staff on long-term care insurance. Local town residents were always asking questions about long term care so this was helpful to them. With the basic training I provided, they were armed with a rudimentary knowledge of long term care insurance, or at least enough to start a conversation. If the resident wanted to explore LTCI further, they were then referred to me. I also called and/or sent letters to a number of assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and support groups to ask if they needed a speaker for any of their upcoming community oriented programs. Even though these programs never had a huge turnout, I always gained at least one or two clients from each engagement, which to me was well worth the effort.
- Differentiate yourself. I created a resume in my head of what I felt were some distinguishing attributes that gave me credibility. I decided upon the following four things that I brought to the table that my competition didn’t:
 - a) I was a 25 year veteran of the insurance business. Obviously, I was here to stay.
 - b) I am a long term care specialist. I don’t sell life insurance, disability insurance or investments.
 - c) I represent multiple companies because I believe each client is unique.

d) I offered flexible scheduling to meet the demands of a varying clientele.

- Help others. I could see that my success was coming from other professionals trusting me, so I offered to help them in return. I promoted their businesses whenever possible, which in turn made them want to promote my business even more. The insurance industry had always been good to me, so it was time for me to give back. Anyone who asked me to do anything that could possibly affect my business, I was there.
- Backburner material goals. When I started my own business I gave myself three years to get back to an even income. I knew that we, as a family, would need to backburner certain things. Dining out, fine wines and home renovations were put on the back burner. I had to be honest with myself regarding how integral having “stuff” and doing “stuff” was to my family and me.
- Know that you won’t get rich quick, but you will build something. What finally was the motive for me leaving the good job that I had worked at for 20 years? It was the cold hard fact that I didn’t own my book of business. I had been an excellent producer for 20 years, and during that time I had sold millions of dollars worth of insurance, but I still didn’t own any of it. The older I got, the more that began to bother me. I began to realize that I had fewer working years ahead of me than what I already had behind me. That was the impetus for me to move on. It was the desire to generate and finally own my renewals. Which brings me to #12...
- Have an attitude of gratitude and always say “thank you”. I know that may sound so incredibly trite, but I can’t tell you how few people these days are grateful and/or say thank you. I’m not at the point yet where I can send a gift basket to everyone who does something nice for me, but I always make sure to say thank you. I thank people for their time on the phone. I thank professional people for meeting with me. I thank clients for purchasing long term care insurance from me. I thank underwriters for prequalifying cases for me. I thank people for inviting me to be a guest speaker. I thank colleagues for sharing information with me, and I am grateful to my family and friends for being supportive of me.

It has been three long hard years, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything.▲

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