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Dick Youngblood: For this 'virtual' firm, every day is flex time

A New Brighton company offers professional work and pay to independent marketing consultants seeking part-time schedules.

By Dick Youngblood, Star Tribune
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Robin Hicks, a full-time marketing manager for a Twin Cities software company when she got pregnant in 2003, planned to resume her career after the birth of her twin sons.

But when the boys were born prematurely and one of them required a heart transplant, work outside the home was out of the question for the foreseeable future.

Then she heard about Professional Services Marketing (PSM), a New Brighton marketing consulting company that offers professional-level work and pay to independent, home-based contractors who have opted for a flexible, part-time schedule.

"It sounded too good to be true, but it wasn't," said Hicks, 41, now a PSM project manager who works 40 to 60 hours a month from her home.

The brainstorm of marketing veteran Terrie Wheeler, PSM is what she calls a "virtual company" that has just one employee -- Wheeler -- and 20 independent contractors who serve a client niche as unusual as the business model.

PSM's focus is small to midsize professional service enterprises, largely law and accounting firms, community banks and health care organizations that do not have their own marketing departments.

It's a business that's on the way to generating $720,000 of revenue this year, based on contracts already signed. The company does not do short-term project work but rather signs 12-month contracts that offer enough time to develop a strategic marketing plan.

Wheeler, 45, labored 14 years as marketing director for several Twin Cities law firms before starting PSM in 1996.

"I figured that if I could market lawyers in as tough a competitive marketplace as they're in, I could market any kind of professional service," she said.

Wheeler chose the "virtual" business model so she could work out of her New Brighton home "and have some semblance of a family life" despite her workaholic tendencies.

She took a rather efficient approach to drawing up her business plan: In pursuing a master's degree in business communications at the University of St. Thomas, she used the research for the plan as the basis for her master's thesis.

It won her an A.

Wheeler has assembled a roster of vendors that includes 10 project managers, three graphic designers, two website developers, three copywriters and a market researcher.

Oh yes, there's also an administrative assistant who flags important e-mails, schedules and confirms meetings for Wheeler and her consultants and handles other paperwork -- all from her home in Madison, Wis., where she recently moved from Minneapolis.

Wheeler's contractors, gleaned from full-time jobs at General Mills, Pillsbury, 3M, Hubbard Broadcasting and Marvin Windows, among others, have opted for an independent, part-time work schedule for a variety of reasons.

Some, like Hicks, wish to stay home with small children. One project manager is enrolled in a seminary, and two others adopted children overseas and needed the flexibility to travel during the adoption process.

On average, consultants work 30 to 50 hours a month and earn $50 to $80 an hour, depending on experience and specialty. They're worth the price, if comments from clients are any indication. In 2003, when Mervin Winston started a two-year relationship with PSM, revenue at his Minnetonka accounting consulting firm grew 13 percent; in 2004 it jumped 40 percent.

The gain "wasn't due 100 percent to PSM," he said. "But it sure was a major factor."

What's the secret? Wheeler "has an incredible gift" for understanding "the essence of your company and ... where you want to go," said Kim Albrightson, founder and president of a New Richmond, Wis., architectural firm. And the payoff is "results I could not have imagined."

PSM's growth, however, has been slow until now -- by design. The reason: For much of the past 11 years, Wheeler has been personally involved in the initial assessment and strategic planning process with each client, which held growth to the limits of her schedule.

Moreover, she also serves as a personal coach for individual attorneys and other professionals, a venture that contributes a third of PSM's revenue.

But now, with a solid cadre of seasoned contractors in place, she has been able to pull away enough to begin marketing her own business, with the result being a projected 40 percent revenue increase in 2007.

This month she also launched an interactive, Web-based service that replicates her personal coaching process. Aimed at lawyers around the state -- and eventually around the country -- the service will cost $1,200 a year for an array of checklists and templates for creating everything from client proposals to news releases to brochures.

Wheeler expects it to be the fastest-growing part of PSM.

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Terrie Wheeler achieved her goal of running a professional business from home by hiring other professionals to work from their homes.

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Professional Services Marketing

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Business: Marketing consulting

Founded: 1996

Headquarters: New Brighton

Website: www.psm-marketing.com

Executive: Founder Terrie Wheeler

Employees: 1 employee, 19 independent consultants, 1 independent contractor serving as an administrative assistant

2006 revenue: $520,000, on track to reach $720,000 in 2007

Quote: "It sounded too good to be true, but it wasn't." -- Robin Hicks, talking about the opportunity to work as a project manager on a part-time basis so she could work at home and care for her twin sons.

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