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FP ENTREPRENEUR

Want to run a business but haven't a clue what? Read on

[Brad Cherniak](#) | 13/08/12 12:09 PM ET



Tyler Anderson/National Post *When femMed CEO Shawna Page originally quit her banking job, she knew she wanted to start a business but didn't know what kind of business to start.*

Five years ago, Shawna Page walked away from her job as an executive at TD Securities, the investment banking arm of TD Bank. Swanky downtown offices, a nice, steady paycheque, yet she felt the need to try something else, to be an entrepreneur.

Ms. Page had no preconceived notion of what she wanted to do — in what industry, what product or service.

She is now chief executive of femMED, a fast-growing line of vitamin supplements for women, with an institutional investor, an aggressive \$400,000 marketing campaign, and a strategic growth plan that includes expansion into the United States, to start. She also has a line-extension strategy that includes supplements for men, teens and children.

How did she do it?

Rather than dabble with ideas in her spare time while keeping her job, Ms. Page decided to take the leap without a safety net. “Nothing focuses the mind like necessity.”

Ms. Page had no distractions to keep her from analyzing opportunities, travelling and figuring out what type of entrepreneurial endeavour she would pursue. She was prepared for an indefinite period of no income while her personal search went ahead. She had decided to fund her own search fund.

In addition to her individual research, Ms. Page spoke at length with friends, family, business contacts and former colleagues with no preconceived notion of what would come of it. It is easier said than done to commit to this as a process.

The result was part serendipity, but mostly discipline and commitment to the process.

It was her husband who at one point suggested she look into opportunities around her personal passion for health and wellness. Once she locked in on this, she focused on analyzing the market for niches of opportunity.

Although it was a personal passion, she analyzed the sector objectively. This was not going to be a hobby project. After a significant amount of research, and interviews with players in and around the nutraceuticals market, Ms. Page travelled to California, the epicentre of that industry, to interact with the key players and analyze how the industry really worked.

She was agnostic about what exactly her business would be, looking initially at finding a line of U.S. products to represent in Canada as a sales representative.

Importantly, she also evaluated the market as a user. She considers herself the prototypical customer: a married woman in her mid-forties with children. But she wanted premium products to address specific health needs across the spectrum of youth, middle age and beyond.

Ms. Page soon realized there was not a viable line of products out there that did all she expected: Natural ingredients of superior quality, and user-friendly and intuitive, making it easy for a woman to self-select the products she knows are right for her.

Her next step was to create it from scratch, but that would take capital.

After exhausting her personal sources of capital, Ms. Page turned to the oft-dreaded friends-and-family round, actually several. In addition to family members, she raised significant funds from former colleagues in the financial sector.

She came to realize friends and family invest in startups such as hers largely for two reasons:

First, it is a personal vote of confidence in the principal, and often doesn't go much beyond that in terms of fundamental assessment of the opportunity.

Second, and more importantly, there is the spoken or unspoken agreement that the principal would rather die trying to succeed, than lose their money.

"This was probably the single key to raising startup capital," said Ms. Page, who raised several million dollars in five or six rounds in a hostile market for traditional industry startups.

Establishing operations, building a team and running a startup requires an endless effort and a constant battle. A steep learning curve must be climbed and decisions made on the fly.

Ms. Page offers these words of advice from her experiences:

— Don't be afraid to try a completely new field. But don't underestimate the time and effort needed to master it.

— Do right by people and your corporate mission. Cutting corners will only undermine your purpose and your credibility.

— Think big, but walk before you run. Ms. Page has many markets in her sight, but says she plans to master Canada first.

— Embrace fear. You will grow and develop as a person because of it — so much more than you might expect.

Because Ms. Page chose a traditional industry business over a web startup, walking away or pivoting was not an option. But that tumultuous stage is fodder for in another column.

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