

22 April 2008
Hawke's Bay Today

“99 Ways to Grow Your Business”

By John Ireland

Sophie Stewart returned from overseas with more than the usual collection of tacky souvenirs and a passport filled with customs stamps. She came home with a business plan.

99 Corporation, Stewart's Hastings-based company, celebrates its first anniversary in May. Its core business - generating leads and building databases - is based on the experience Stewart gained while working for a year in Australia and three more in the United Kingdom.

The idea for 99 took seed shortly after Stewart, 27, finished her Bachelor of Commerce degree in Dunedin. Working as an account manager for Hewlett Packard in Melbourne, she discovered an affinity for the art of cold calling. She also realized the importance of compiling and maintaining customer databases.

She continued to polish her skills at a large call centre in London before moving on to a more intimate setting in Edinburgh. It was this latter position, where employees set up their own offices, which formed the template for 99.

After making her way back to Hawke's Bay, Stewart's next challenge was to tailor her experience and insights to this country's business methods. "All the other (world) markets are so much more developed than New Zealand in relation to call centres, contacts, lead generation - all those sorts of things," she says. "It's a relatively new concept here. So it's a totally different market to be direct marketing into."

Working from a home office, Stewart supervises a staff of 10 who work the phones to help clients find new customers or income streams, or keep track of existing ones through databases. Other available services include conducting surveys and doing market research.

One service that has proven very popular is following up on event RSVPs for businesses whose time is limited when it comes to doing anything more than focusing on the day-to-day minutiae of survival in these sketchy economic times.

Once 99 is under contract to a client, it builds a database of potential targets. The next step is to ring those targets to introduce the client - its business and service - and inquire about potential interest in participating in an initial discussion.

"It's not just generating any leads, it's generating qualified leads," Stewart says. "Someone who is actually interested in the product or service that is being offered."

Stewart says her clients are quite happy to have 99 take on the often daunting task of making cold calls to generate appointments, or following up with existing customers to gauge satisfaction levels or reap more work.

"They know we're going to do it well," she says. "That we've got good systems in place for monitoring the number of calls and when appointments are. We do the whole process, from start to finish. "We almost act as your marketing tool, your PA if you like, going right down to actually organizing the appointment for you."

It's this idea of working efficiently behind the scenes, while continuously promoting the client, that provided the origin for her company's name. "It's based on Get Smart," Stewart says. "Our clients are Maxwell Smart and we're Agent 99. So you're out there doing what you do best and, more to the point, making money, and we'll do all the background work to keep you doing it."

To date, her company has worked with nearly 50 companies covering a wide spectrum of sectors, including business administration, retail sales and marketing, hospitality, and real estate and property investors.

Stewart admits her business enterprise has proven to be more successful than she'd initially envisioned. "I thought maybe I'd be on the phones myself, with one or two callers, for the first six months," she says. "But I've only really been on the phone to try out scripts. It's been great." Having staff do the actual phoning allows Stewart time to continue refining the services 99 can offer.

"I'm always tweaking, in the sense of what people are asking for," she says. "There are all sorts of different ideas that people are wanting help with. I'm always thinking and researching." Stewart feels fortunate to be located in Hawke's Bay.

"We have quite a few new products and new services here and people are early adaptors to what's happening," she says. "They're always keen."