

DIARY OF A CONSULTANT



David steps aside while his other partner, wife Stacey, shares her views on the past year.

By Stacey Zahn With David Zahn

A year in review...

For as long as David worked for someone else, he talked about owning his own business. When he was interviewed for the job with his prior firm, David was asked what his career aspirations were. Instead of talking about growing with the firm, David said his goal was to have his own consulting practice. David may wear the title *consultant* now, but I wished at the time he had checked with me before telling a company that was interested in hiring him that he was planning on leaving eventually. In spite of that, the company did hire him, and it was a

productive relationship for it and David. The company figured out what to do with an instructional designer, and David internalized the elements he wanted to replicate in his own firm one day and identified those he'd discard.

He'd periodically grow restless, and we'd talk about whether the time was right for him (us) to take the mighty leap into business ownership. Invariably, fates would intervene and David would be offered a raise, a bonus, stock options, or some other reason to put starting anew on the back burner. I found ways to spend the added income, but I knew that was going to

end at some point. When the decision was finally made for David and Jeff (their company let them go), it seemed unbelievable to me. All of the fear, excitement, and planning that seemed in the future became a reality.

As of June 2000, David and Jeff were in their own business. There wasn't going to be a reliable, steady paycheck. As much as we knew this day was coming, we really hadn't prepared financially. There was always next year to start saving for the hard times and always a one-time expense that wouldn't be a drain in years to come.

So, the pressure was on for Clow Zahn Associates to be a success from day 1. After many high-fives, rapid

from our boys and me. When the basement door is shut, we know to keep the noise down. When the door's open, I think it's because someone forgot to shut it. So, I'm constantly shutting the door and having to listen to the kids complain about not being able to visit their father. Complicating the matter, our cat can open the door by standing up and pulling on it with his paw. Consequently, I'm never sure if the door is supposed to be open or closed.

Now, we run the washing machine, dryer, and dishwasher late at night or early in the morning so they don't disrupt phone calls that may come in. David didn't ask me to do that, but I try

David ships most of his office supplies and other deliveries to our home, so a FedEx or Staples truck makes its way to our door at least twice a week. That doesn't particularly bother me, but I think our neighbors wonder just what goes on in our house that requires such frequent deliveries of big boxes (holding just binders more times than not). When David's out of town and a delivery comes to the house, it's my responsibility to be home or pick it up at a central depot. It's not that big of an imposition.

It was exciting when the first shipment of shirts with the CZA logo was delivered. It was less thrilling when the second and third shipments arrived and we had to figure out where to store them. The mugs, pens, magnets, calculators, and other promotional items take up space. Strangely, our friends keep track of what we've given them and what we've given other friends.

Our friends have been supportive. Randy, who works for an advertising agency, helped with the logo and provided some marketing assistance for mailers, brochures, and so forth. Another friend, Jim, who's active in various industry associations, has kept his eye out for opportunities for David to speak at conferences. Jeff's wife, Bev, and I have contacted a few people on behalf of CZA for business potential.

Since Jeff moved to Dallas, David has begun talking about us moving there as well. The lower cost of living and housing makes a compelling argument, but I'm not prepared to leave my Connecticut home—at least not with the kids still in grade school and my network of friends and career firmly established here. I'm an elected official in my town (I even have my own pens with my name on them) and am active in the local board of education and P.T.A. David hasn't pressed the issue, only mentioned it as a possibility someday.

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heartbeats waiting for the mail to bring overdue checks, and tears (rare) of frustration, CZA is successful. David often refers to it as "our" business and to the importance of my role, but I view it as his business. I've stayed away from the day-to-day activities, with the exception of once unknowingly passing a computer virus to his PC that generated emails to the entire database of clients.

So, we have a lot to talk about when we get together over dinner or after we put the kids to bed. We share the day's highlights and lowlights.

When David isn't traveling on assignment or at the office, he's in his basement office (a duplicate of his office one town away) in our house. That has required some adjustment

to be considerate of his desire to sound professional on the phone and not have to compete with the sound of my canvas sneakers tumbling in the dryer. Fortunately, he goes on a lot of business trips, so I let the laundry pile up and do it when he's not around.

It seems that every spare moment David has he checks his email or tries to fit in some work on an assignment. I understand that, but it drives me crazy at times. Also, our telephone lines get both personal and business calls. I've seen him on a dial-up modem connection, with his cell phone to one ear, and the family telephone line with a caller on hold. I get frustrated when I'm asked not to use the phone because he's expecting a call.

For the time being, Jeff and David have worked it out so they split the country in half, work-wise.

David and Jeff are self-motivated and don't seek the applause of others if they believe in what they're doing. Our families individually and together have become closer as a result of the partnership. Jeff's son, Chase, lived with us for a summer after his family moved to Dallas so he could stay at a job he loved. My grandmother has become brand loyal based on what contracts David and Jeff sign. The only real downside to being in our own business is the cost of insurance.

Certainly, we've all learned a lot over the past year and will continue to learn more. On the whole, it has been more

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rewarding and less scary than I thought it would be. But it also opened my eyes to just how interconnected many things are. When I read the newspaper now, I look for any news about the economy that might affect the business.

When David and I were married and called to have our first dance as husband and wife, I feared we'd be stiff and clumsy. But David smiled and guided me confidently across the floor. My trust in him was absolute then, as now.

To contact David for further information about his evolution or to share your thoughts with him, call 203.221.2789 or email davidzahn@clowzahn.com.