

Burnaby mother at home with tutoring business

Paying top dollar for consultants, coaches was a wise investment for Susan Cumberland

BY JENNY LEE, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 16, 2011



BURNABY, B.C. — October 28, 2011 — Susan Cumberland (R) owns a tutoring business which brings together students like Marco Palmieri, 9, and teachers like Kristin Prefontaine, on Friday, October 28, 2011 in Burnaby. (Glenn Baglo / PNG) (For Jenny Lee / VANCOUVER SUN)

Photograph by: GLENN BAGLO, VANCOUVER SUN

METRO VANCOUVER - Suburban mom Susan Cumberland knew how to tutor, but hadn't a clue how to run a business.

She went ahead anyway.

Today, Cumberland's home-based tutoring business, Academic Advantage, has 500 B.C.-certified teachers on its roster, a franchisee in Victoria, and Cumberland has just registered a business name in the U.S.

Not bad for a self-described "bumbling" entrepreneur.

The secret to her success? "I think it is spending money," she admitted with a peal of laughter.

As an educator, Cumberland is as quick to identify her own weaknesses as those of her students. Naturally, she addresses those deficiencies by hiring tutors for the tutor.

“When I tell friends I spent \$250 to talk to a [a marketing consultant] for an hour, most people are blown away by that,” she said during an interview at her efficient but humble home office in the attic of her Burnaby home. Her take? “You’ve got to know your weaknesses and when to get help.”

Of course, it helps that Cumberland has created a customer-friendly business model. She hires only certified teachers who work in students’ homes. The parents pay \$50 an hour, but there are no service contracts — parents simply book what they need and pay the teacher as they go. The teacher later submits \$10 to Cumberland. It’s simple and elegant.

Cumberland has also created a fine, if unconventional, interaction between her work and family life. She hired her two part-time secretaries and office manager with the express understanding that they may be asked to pick up her two middle school kids from school or drive them to activities.

Cumberland started out as a high school English teacher.

“I got eaten alive by students, as I was young, naive and not strong enough to control a classroom,” she said.

Discouraged, she switched to teaching English as a Second Language in Japan during the ESL boom of the late 1980s. Her most prestigious job was teaching the Japanese prime minister’s secretaries.

When she returned home and started a family, she opened Academic Advantage with the dream of creating a family-friendly job. She worked hard and was soon hiring tutors instead of teaching herself, but success rapidly degenerated into a nightmare.

“I was going to bed late, gaining weight, not taking time to exercise or eat right,” she said. “My accounting was behind by six months. I had no idea who paid and who hadn’t paid and Revenue Canada was sending paperwork that I didn’t understand.”

She finally advertised on Craigslist for a bookkeeper. “Halfway through the interview, I burst into tears while explaining my turmoil. The girl was kind and started work right then and there.”

Cumberland is nothing if not a quick learner. She soon hired someone to answer the phone, signed up for Douglas College business courses, and, in a surprise move, hired her instructor to organize her office and paperwork. Cumberland admits it wasn’t really her idea. “I guess I got to a point where I felt so overwhelmed and she kind of talked me into it,” she said. The \$1,000 fee was worth it just to have a second pair of eyes with fresh ideas. Now Cumberland was on a roll. She met a technician at a networking event which sparked the idea of building a database. She called the man’s references in South Africa and enlisted techie mothers from her kids’ kindergarten to review his proposal.

“They tore it apart and said he didn’t know what he was doing,” she said. Confused and out of her depth, she ultimately went on gut. Besides, the technician’s \$12,000 proposal was tediously detailed. “I got so lost and bored with reading the documents that I approved it,” she said, only half joking.

Her initial investment has since doubled, but she's built the core of her business. When she enters a student registration, the system creates a match and sends automatic emails to appropriate teachers by subject and geographic area.

"These days, everyone has an iPhone, so the teachers respond within minutes, so we call the clients back almost immediately and they are always shocked by that," Cumberland said. The system also tracks which teachers haven't paid, sends out automatic email reminders and ties in to Academic Advantage's bookkeeping.

Next up, Cumberland hired a marketing coach — he of the \$250-an-hour phone calls. She met him at a free seminar. "I thought, 'They are very good at selling themselves,' " she said. The coach had her create an operations manual so the business could run smoothly without her. For a year, she paid \$1,000 a month for four hours a month.

"It's not that he was a fantastic coach," she said. "He was quite young actually, and may not have known a lot more about marketing than me but he was pushing me forward and it did help my business."

"As you move along in business, you notice you have strengths and weaknesses," she said. "I work alone. I have nobody to go 'Rah rah rah' with," she said. Coaches "force you to do homework."

Cumberland's latest adviser is a franchise coach whom she found in a franchise association magazine.

"I guess I'm one of those teachers that realized that [teaching] is paid by the hour and it can not flourish beyond that," she said. She sees value in spending money for consultants and advertising. "You have to spend money on abstract things. You never know what's going to pay off."

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