



READY FOR LIFTOFF

Appleton start up launches as B2B's 5th annual Firefighters of NE Wisconsin initiative wraps up



by Sean Fitzgerald,
NN B2B publisher

The entrepreneur

Kelly Steinke
READ Learning Educational Services LLC
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The consultant

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Getting a new business off the ground is a process wrought with uncertainty, most entrepreneurs will acknowledge.

That's certainly been the case for former teacher Kelly Steinke as she's worked through the start-up stage of Appleton-based READ Learning Services. Since mid-2015 – when Steinke made the decision to leave the classroom and develop her reading education consultancy into a fulltime business – Steinke has been working with business consultant Gary Vaughan of Guident Business Solutions in Appleton at no cost as part of New North B2B's Firefighters of Northeast Wisconsin program.

Through this effort in each edition of B2B since last October, we've tracked the progress of Steinke's work on her start up leading up to her launch coming in March. In exchange for sharing her entrepreneurial journey, she received consult from Vaughan at no cost. Steinke admits the road to launching her business has been characterized by twists and turns unrelated to the original plan she had for her business a year ago.

"What the vision once was has really broadened," Steinke said, noting that initially she just planned to run a clinic to help dyslexic students read better and become more successful in the classroom. The clinic, tutoring and testing center still

remains one important facet of READ Learning Services, but during the past several months, Vaughan has helped Steinke diversify her revenue stream to ensure greater financial stability as her business starts off.

As a leading expert on helping students with dyslexia learn to improve their level of reading and succeed in their studies, Steinke speaks and writes about students falling through the cracks in schools because their learning disabilities haven't been diagnosed. She plans to capitalize on such opportunities to speak and write as an eventual revenue source. She's already been invited to present during one of the sessions at a national home schooling conference in Ohio later this month.

Perhaps the most profitable segment of her start up could be the Silver Moon Spelling Rules instructional kit Steinke rolled out in early March. It's a classroom product sold to instructors and home school parents, but Steinke is finding interest for the product from unexpected markets, such as teaching English as a second language to adults.

"One thing we're identifying is just how broad this field (of reading services) is," said Vaughan. "We have to think about how to diversify (profit centers)."

Countdown to product launch

Perhaps one of the most challenging and time consuming aspects of Steinke's new business launch was the development and release of her spelling rules product. Like any new product coming into the marketplace, Vaughan indicated he and Steinke made every effort to ensure it's legally protected, fully developed and professional in its appearance and functionality, and priced accordingly.

Steinke is taking a three-pronged approach to selling her Silver Moon Spelling product – which includes a total of 21 spelling rules in the inaugural set – by incorporating online sales through her website, retail sales through education product distributors, and direct sales through the conferences and conventions she attends.

The product itself includes an instructional manual, a set of teacher flash cards and a separate set of student cards – all designed with the leading research methodologies for reading in mind. Pricing for the kits was established comparative to other similar spelling kits available on the market.

"This whole program is built to drive memorization," Steinke said, noting it's a distinct characteristic of her product. "I really think this product is going to help a lot of people."

Properly protecting the product and preparing it for market meant registering the product with an International Standard Book Number, otherwise known as an ISBN, and securing a Universal Product Code (UPC) for retail channels. With Vaughan's assistance, Steinke has built various marketing collateral around the spelling kit product, including display banners to dress up her exhibit at conferences and trade shows.

She's put a significant amount of research into ensuring the Silver Moon spelling kit will appeal to schools, home teachers and others.

"I'm hoping that training institutes (for teachers) will be interested in buying the kit to supplement their training," Steinke said

Methodology

New North B2B magazine began seeking nominations for its 5th annual Firefighters of Northeast Wisconsin initiative in mid-2015, with a goal of assisting those northeast Wisconsin small business owners who feel as if they're constantly burning the candle at both ends, putting out fires, spinning their wheels, but intent on finding a way to improve. In the end, we selected Appleton-based READ Learning Educational Services LLC with its start up.

Through the generous help of Gary Vaughan of Guident Business Solutions in Appleton, READ Learning Educational Services owner Kelly Steinke received five month's worth of consulting at no cost to help her work on the strategy of launching and growing her business.

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Molding an entrepreneur

Other aspects of Steinke's development – as well as that of her business – during the past six months include enhancing her financial aptitude. Steinke has learned to interpret balance sheets, cash flow statements and profit and loss statements, all critical to understanding the financial status of her business at any moment.

She's also learned more about networking in a business environment, which Vaughan describes as being much different than networking in other professional settings, particularly in education. Steinke reported one recent networking success led to conversations with Appleton-based health care provider ThedaCare regarding the opportunity to come in and speak to its pediatrician group about early detection of learning disabilities associated with reading.

Additionally, she's learned to manage collaborations with vendors to accomplish tasks for her business that she simply can't take care of as a staff of one. Whether it's been with her web site developer, her accountant, her attorney or her graphic artist, she's managed large projects with contracted partners to help evolve her business.

Steinke acknowledges the totality of the entrepreneurial experience presents much more than even she initially anticipated, but she's been taking it all in stride.

"It's interesting to look at how much 'firefighting' I've had to do when launching my business," she said. "Not in the sense that I was in financial trouble or had big problems, but in



Submitted images
An example of the flash cards used in the Silver Moon Spelling Rules instructional kit developed by Steinke.

the sense that most everything on the business end was new learning and there were a lot of little 'fires' that came up along the way that took time and energy to put out.

"I'd think I had something completed that I could check off my list when I'd realize there was more to it than met the eye. The 'fire' seemed to be figuring out the details – especially when it came to QuickBooks and getting the products produced."

Unrelated directly to the business, but further developing her professional resume, Steinke has been tapped to instruct a graduate course through Marian University titled Executive Functioning Success. The 8-hour course offers one continuing education credit for professionals and teaches executive functioning skills, time management and organization through visual strategies and increasing metacognition.

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Finding balance

As B2B magazine wraps up its 5th annual Firefighters of Northeast Wisconsin series aimed at helping business owners spend less time extinguishing fires and more time growing their enterprise, it's worth noting one common challenge among nearly every entrepreneur – just starting out or well seasoned – is striking a balance between the business, family life and community engagement. It's a leading cause of business failure for business owners not adept at adjusting their schedules to manage the demands of running a company.

“Self management of time is one thing that all business owners need to grapple with,” said Vaughan, who noted it's an issue that many of his clients with Guident Business Solutions face on a regular basis. “When the business starts to manage you from the standpoint of taking all of your time, that's when family becomes that extra ‘thing’ on the side.”

For her part, Steinke is finding her way to a more balanced life as a new business owner. She's taken up kickboxing in her downtime to help relieve stress and commit some disciplined physical activity into her schedule. Even though she's just starting out and hasn't had much opportunity to develop a daily routine of operating tasks for her business, Steinke appears much more at ease now than during her 15-year career as a teacher beholden to the schedule of the school bell.

“I have a lot more peace in my life than I did in my previous career,” she said, indicating that she walks her girls to school every day now and chaperones their field trips, luxuries she couldn't enjoy when she was scheduled to be in the classroom as a teacher.

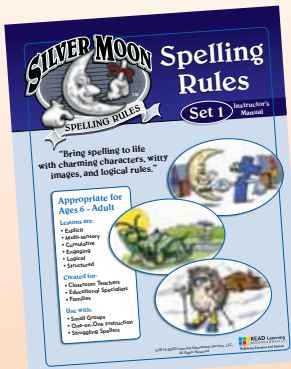
Vaughan has worked with hundreds of business owners throughout his career, both as a consultant and in the classroom, and knows that after five months of working closely with Steinke on READ Learning Services, she has what it takes to make her dreams of being a business owner a smashing success.

“One of the things I noticed right away is the passion that Kelly has for what she's doing,” said Vaughan. “This has the legs to be a viable business. I have no doubt.”

While reflecting on the start-up phase of READ Learning Services leading up to its launch, Steinke recalled her days as a teacher attending conferences and workshops on reading disabilities, thinking that one day she would be the expert at the front presenting in front of the audience of teachers. She dreamed that the instructional tools those colleagues were using in the classroom to help students read better would be developed by her as well. Both of those dreams have finally achieved fruition.

“It has been eye-opening to see the business as its own entity,” Steinke said, indicating it's been a long road since she decided to leave the job security of a tenured job in the classroom to pursue her business fulltime.

“I haven't regretted the decision once.” ■



The cover of the instructional manual for Steinke's new spelling product.

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