



a business
minute

with Heather Willison, Owner, SNAP! Public Relations

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BOULDER — Though Heather Willison had long contemplated starting her own business, the launch date was vague, somewhere down the road.

Then circumstances intervened. Early this year, months into her job as public relations director for Pharmaca Interactive Pharmacy, "the opportunity just sort of happened," she says. A number of freelance projects came her way, and in mid-February, SNAP! Public Relations was born.

Willison is a native of Austin, Texas. Her background includes doing PR in entertainment and high-tech firms in Los Angeles, New York and her home state. After moving to Boulder in 2002, she spent two years as publicity and promotions manager for etown, followed by three years as the PR director for Izze. After Pepsi bought Izze, she moved to Pharmaca to add retail to her resume.

Now, after three months, the SNAP! client list include Boulder-based Pixie Mate, Twist, eco-friendly sponges; Tambobamba, boxed Nuevo Latino-cuisine meals; Los Angeles-based Eco-Planet, organic cookies and crackers; and retail stores Dish Gourmet and Haute Cakes, both in one location on Pearl Street.

Though she specializes in natural products, Willison is also handling PR for her friends, Vail residents Trista and Ryan Sutter, whose courtship started on the TV show "The Bachelorette." The couple are expecting a baby and needed help handling the media, she says.

What nudged you into deciding to set out on your own?

I was offered a significant amount of freelance work and thought the time was right to turn the opportunities into something. While I was at Izze, I talked about going out on my own, but I wanted one more professional job before I gave it a go, which is why I went to Pharmaca. I learned a lot even though I was only there four months — retail is a whole different world.

After the Izze sale and all the press attention, I got a lot of phone calls. The moment seemed right. When you envision something happening for yourself,

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samples or seek out product placements in catalogs, TV and film.

How do you charge for your services?

I charge by the hour, which is different from most agencies who charge a retainer. With an hourly rate, my clients know exactly what they are getting.

What's the most difficult part of run-

ning your own agency?

How did you get the job at Izze?

Like everyone else, I discovered the drink and loved it. I started to watch the company, and then — the old-fashioned way — I read the help wanted ad. I learned so much at Izze. I was the only PR person, had great interns and lots of support, but it was a big job. The team there was amazing, and we really fed off each other and learned so much. Without that experience I don't think I'd be where I am today.

What does it take to create your own company?

I'm still figuring that out. I am lucky enough to have great friends, entrepreneurs who have started their own businesses. I've been watching their progress and asking a lot of questions. If you really focus on a goal, I found out you can figure out what you need to know. The surprising thing to me is that I haven't had one moment of panic. I feel that this is what I should be doing.

What were your startup costs?

I work out of my home, so it's not like I have a lot of overhead. For PR all you really need is a phone, which you're on all the time, and an Internet connection.

Do you miss being in an office?

I do, since I consider myself a social person, and that's actually why I am in PR. I've made it a point to often make meetings over lunch and try to incorporate the social aspects of work into my day as much as I can. The best piece of advice I got was "get dressed every day or you may find yourself still in your bathrobe at 4."

With PR what exactly do you do?

The bottom line is that I am here to spread the word, to get more consumers familiar with the product and increase sales. What I do specifically depends on the client and what they need, and dealing with a launch is much different than with an established product.

Traditional PR is typically media relations — print, radio, television — but what I do encompasses more, including alternative and guerilla marketing. My clients are smaller companies, often startups, so I need to be creative with dollars.

The Internet and blogs are very influential, so I put a lot of emphasis on online marketing. Also, with my contacts in the entertainment industry I can often weave the art and music community into what I do. I also often frequent trade shows and other events, donate products and offer

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ning your own agency?

It's hard to turn away any business. I am fortunate enough to have a lot of people calling me, but I don't want to take on too many clients. I like to provide personal attention to my clients, talk to them every other day and keep in touch by e-mail. And if something comes up at the last minute, I need to be able to handle it.