

After Hours

Everyone needs a cheerleader

By Jan Dean

If the path to hell is paved with good intentions, many of us are well on the way. No matter what New Year's resolutions we make, there's never time to get everything done. When life feels like a tug of war between work and family obligations, taking care of ourselves is usually the thing we skip.

Enter Alison Meyer, a cheerful whirling dervish of energy and health who heads up a life performance coaching business called, fittingly, Alison Meyer Coaching. Until recently Meyer owned Naturally Fit – an exercise and lifestyle studio. She had worked at the facility for 10 years, starting when she was studying kinesiology at Wilfrid Laurier, and bought the business. Now she has sold Naturally Fit and intends to put more of her focus on coaching us to take care of ourselves.

"A lot of people are successful in business, but they neglect their health," says Meyer. "And you can only fake it for so long."

Face it, most of us know we should be eating better, exercising, and getting more sleep, but somehow there's always another deadline to meet, or we're beat from meeting the last one. Meyer says that people come to her when they are ready to make a change – when they're ready to take responsibility and commit to taking care of themselves. Often that seems to happen in the fall, rather than after the New Year.

Meyer says a lot of her clients are women, often in their late 40s to mid-50s. Or at least it starts with women, and when husbands and significant others see the changes they are motivated to start the process themselves.

Meyer provides life coaching one-on-one or for small groups, but the telephone is the major way of making the weekly connection for both individuals and groups. Three phone calls a week that usually range from 20 to 45 minutes give Meyer the chance to



Alison Meyer owner of Alison Meyer Coaching has recently sold her Naturally Fit Personal Training studio and will be going full time into Life Performance Coaching for high achieving professionals. Photo by Stephen Uhraney

help us figure out what goals we want to set and what strategies we can use to achieve them. The goals are "tiny little things" according to Meyer. "It's about substituting good habits for bad and there are daily goals like eating a veggie and hummus snack or drinking three bottles of water in a day."

And then there is email which Meyer uses extensively. Sometimes it's a reminder to drink more water, sometimes it's an inspirational quote, but with the phone and email connection, it means that clients can connect to her no matter where they are in the world – handy when so many business

people travel.

Meyer provides an outside view that family and friends are too close to provide. She says, "family and friends want to solve your problems for you, I'd rather the client figured out how to come up with a solution themselves."

Setting goals and then planning how to meet them is the key here. Clients decide those goals and also decide when they have achieved them. But many continue to connect with Meyer every month or two just to make sure they stay on track with their new healthier lifestyle. She says the

biggest obstacle is stubbornness and routine – "I can't do that!" is a phrase she hears a lot. But with encouragement, clients can get past that and start figuring out how they're going to accomplish the goal. Meyer says that, "ideally the goal and the strategy is determined by the individual, but sometimes I nudge them along."

Think of Meyer as a vocal conscience – she provides the accountability that so many of us need to achieve. But she is also a great cheerleader. She enjoys hearing clients brag about how they're doing. And face it. Most people don't see taking a walk or staying hydrated as major accomplishments. For some of us – those things are major and we need to brag about them.

Meyer is keen to do more corporate work – she loves public speaking. She admits she gets a bit nervous before a speech, but says the chance to touch so many lives and help people achieve makes it easier for her to focus on the message she delivers.

Interestingly, most of her corporate clients are from the service sector: accountants, insurance companies etc. That surprised her. They hire her to come in and do lunch-and-learns, do workshops, or organize corporate retreats. "Corporations are beginning to understand that prevention is cheaper than dealing with illness," says Meyer. She is also planning to write a book. It will be mostly about life coaching: combining fitness and a little science to explain why it is so important, with the mind-work that is essential to change a life.

Proving she practices what she preaches about setting goals and following through is the Health Column that Meyer writes for the Business Times. She is starting with the smaller goal of writing a monthly column, before she makes the leap to writing a book.

To find out more about performance life coaching check out www.alisonmeyercoaching.com, or contact Meyer at alison@alisonmeyercoaching.com.

It's way past time to bring some unique business ideas from across the pond

"What are some cool new business ideas that you've heard of from around the world?" That was the question a local high school student asked me at a recent speaking engagement. Having no profound answer to offer her, I kept the question tucked-away in the back of my mind as my wife and I traveled to the lovely Mediterranean. Surprisingly, it didn't take me very long to find an answer!

In Barcelona, sitting on the upper-deck of a hop-on/hop-off tour bus, I looked down to the crowded streets below and saw some odd looking bikes darting in-and-out of traffic. What made these bikes really stand-out was the distinctive name printed on the side of the bikes—Bicing (and no, that's not a typo). After seeing hundreds of these Bicing bikes all over the city, I did as any

uneducated tourist would do - I looked it up on Wikipedia.

In March 2007, Barcelona city council and Clear Channel (an American communications company) developed a bicycle system that allows users to travel throughout the core and take the pressure off other tired and overworked systems of urban transportation. Users pay a membership fee of 24 Euros per year and have access to the 209 Bicing stations strategically placed across the city (www.bicing.com). It's a very simple business model. If I wanted to travel from point A to point B, I would simply swipe my Bicing membership card at the station closest to point A, then pedal my way to the station nearest point B. Using the bikes does not cost money for members unless you go

over the 30 minute time limit (at which time a small incremental late charge is applied). Not only are the bikes considered to be theft-proof; but as of November 2007, the bikes had collectively traveled more than 8,000,000 km. Very Cool.

The next "cool business idea" sighting happened at the airport in Rome on the final morning of our trip. We were standing in line waiting to check-in for our flight, when I looked over and saw a huge line forming in front of a kiosk. When the kiosk opened, an attendant would take a suitcase from the customer, put it on a platform, and shrink-wrap the luggage (www.luggagewrapping.com). Not only does the shrink-wrap protect the bag and the articles inside, but it also brings peace of mind to the paranoid traveler (like me) who

thinks their luggage might be tampered with. It's one of those ideas that make you wonder, "why didn't I think of that?"

What I find most interesting about Bicing and the aforementioned shrink-wrapping service is that these business ideas are by no means earth-shattering. Bicing is the equivalent of borrowing a book from the library (except you can drop it off at the nearest branch when you're finished), and the shrink-wrapping kiosk has turned what most would consider to be an industrial task into a domestic one. The ideas are not extraordinary, the application is.

This begs the question: are any business ideas actually new, or do all business ideas come from a preexisting one? Instead of debating whether or not there is such a thing as originality, I'd rather focus on the "cool" factor of a business idea—does a model provide an innovative solution to an existing problem. For Bicing, the goal was to reduce pollution, roadway noise and traffic congestion. Check, check, and check. With the shrink-wrapping kiosk, the service in itself is quite simple, but transferring this service from the industrial to the retail market is what makes the idea quite unique.

That being said, if I had the opportunity to go back in time and answer the high schooler's question, I highly doubt that I would have impressed her class. I mean seriously, bicycles and shrink-wrapping are probably not the answers that they are looking for. But taking existing technologies and giving them new business applications that fill a need and turn a profit is definitely cool!

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