

New game plan

BY KATHRYN HOPPER | CORRESPONDENT

Jane Littlefield had seen steady success with her home health care company, September Services Inc., taking it from a two-person startup in 1983 to more than 90 employees in 2006. But despite the growth, operations had never really shifted out of mom-and-pop mode.

Littlefield felt business was doing well enough, bringing in \$2.3 million in annual revenue by assisting older adults with daily chores such as taking medications, cooking dinner and driving to doctor appointments. But her 28-year-old son, Ben Littlefield, a freshly minted MBA graduate, told her she could do better.

He devised a new marketing plan, but ran into a roadblock when he tried to build a basic database.

"He was about to pull his hair out," Littlefield said. "Our computers weren't networked. I had all kinds of lists for marketing, but nothing interfaced."

To tackle this and other problems, the son suggested something radical: bringing in an outside business coach to look for ways the Dallas company could cut overhead and improve productivity and profitability.

Littlefield was concerned that a business coach might suggest practices that didn't mesh with her company's caregiving mission.

"In this business, you have to be nurturing," she said. "You don't want to be too hard-nosed."

Still, she reluctantly agreed

SEPTEMBER SERVICES INC. TAPPED AN OUTSIDE BUSINESS COACH TO HELP TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

SITTING COMFORTABLY: Jane Littlefield, seated, President of September Services, with Silvera Thompson, the home health care company's director of nursing.



CARE-GIVER: *Profit boost*

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and in June 2006 hired Jim Talerico with Chicago-based **Strategic Business Partners**. After spending six weeks going over the books and observing operations, Talerico delivered his game plan in a three-inch-thick white binder.

Inside, he had detailed new business practices and procedures designed to not only boost the company's present profits, but also prepare it for growth.

"In about 10 years, as baby boomers age, this business is going to absolutely boom," said Talerico, director of client satisfaction at **Strategic Business Partners**. "We wanted to have her business positioned to take advantage of that growth."

Talerico dug into the company's numbers, identifying ways to curb expenses such as costly overtime pay and finding new revenue generators for the company that rely on private payment instead of Medicare reimbursements.

For example, he and Littlefield found a profitable niche serving clients who needed someone to simply be there and make sure medications are administered. They also noted a growing demand for caregivers who could travel with clients, many of whom are wealthy, who wanted to fly or go on cruises. As a result, Littlefield launched an ancillary service called Adventure Aides.

Adding structure Talerico standardized pay scales and set up job descriptions and an employee evaluation process. He pointed out the importance of structured communications by letting Littlefield know just how much her frequent management team meetings hit the bottom line.

"He'd see us in the meeting room and say, 'You realize you just spent \$207 an hour,'" she said.

"That gave me pause. I realized I needed to delegate."

Littlefield is now looking at hiring a registered nurse who can take on administrative duties, freeing her to market the company.

All in all, the consulting cost around \$50,000 - an amount Littlefield says she more than recouped in savings during the last six months of 2006 alone.

NAME: September Services
BUSINESS: Home health nursing care
ADDRESS: 5925 Forest Lane, Ste. 400, Dallas 75239
TOP EXECUTIVES: Jane Littlefield, president
OWNERSHIP: Private
EMPLOYEES: 90
ANNUAL REVENUE: \$2.3 million (projected, 2007)
WEB: www.septservices.com

"Some of the saving suggestions were easy to do; others required more long-term planning," she said. "We have continued to implement the plan in 2007."

While her company's revenue has remained about the same this year compared to last, Littlefield said its profitability is higher because of the efficiencies Talerico helped her realize.

The entrepreneur keeps his white binder on her desk for frequent reference and tracks her firm's progress, noting key indicators such as the number of hours billed each week.

"When you do something for 24 years you start out scrambling, doing whatever works," Littlefield said. "Through the years that becomes the way you do things. Sometimes you need someone new to come in with a fresh approach. Otherwise, you can just get stuck in a routine."

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