

SMALL BUSINESS WEEK

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Growing her business

ENTREPRENEURS:
Best-laid plans
can fall apart
unexpectedly

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If there was a book about the perfect way to open a small business in the Lower Mainland, Abby Palmer would be the model entrepreneur.

After years of thinking about starting her own business, many months studying how to do it and nine months scouting the perfect location, Palmer opened her serene little garden accent shop in Vancouver.

She thought she'd planned for everything.

But three months after opening the Gardening Circle on Cambie Street, the neighbourhood learned the rapid-transit project would no longer be built by underground tunnel; instead, the street would be split by a massive trench and years of construction chaos.

"I had done all the due diligence," said Palmer, 36. "I still ended up in a nightmare."

It could have been the end of another new business, one more number to add to the national statistics that show nearly half of Canadian small businesses fail before they reach their second anniversary. But with a little luck and some serious determination, Palmer has made her store a small-business success story.

"Cambie Street," she said, "turned



Abby Palmer moved her shop, the Gardening Circle, to Fort Langley and it's thriving. WAYNE LEIDENFROST — THE PROVINCE

out to be a blessing in disguise."

At university, Palmer studied English literature, but it wasn't long after graduation that she knew she wanted her own business and she set out to learn how to do it right. She took a job at a Mercedes-Benz dealership to learn how the company positioned itself at the top of the automotive market. As a middle manager, she saw how the systems oper-

ated and the value of procedure manuals and policies.

Then, to see how business operated on a smaller scale, she worked in the service department at a boat-repair shop on Granville Island. Finally, she enrolled in a government program that prepares people for self-employment.

"I liked the creative aspect of having your own business," she said. "I

liked that my imagination was the only thing that would limit me."

She learned how to write a business plan and explored what kind of business would be successful as well as satisfying. She developed a profile of her primary customer to focus her plan and her inventory.

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Tips for startups

Here are a few tips about starting a business from Abby Palmer, owner of the Gardening Circle, and Laura Jones, vice-president for Western Canada of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business:

Develop a business plan.

Palmer: "This is such a great way to work out problems on paper before you jump in."

Jones: "Having a sound business plan, doing your homework is the most important thing."

Be prepared to compensate staff.

Palmer: "I pay more than minimum wage, and I encourage my employees to tell me what they want to learn and then pay them to take the training."

I also have team meetings where everybody gives feedback and they can see their ideas help shape how we move forward."

Jones: "In today's market, hiring can be more difficult than in the past — even entry-level pay is up."

"And expectations about flexibility have changed dramatically."

Hire staff, even if it's just one person for a few hours once a week.

Palmer: "No matter how small your budget, try to get somebody in so you can work 'on' the business rather than 'in' it."

Build your own advisory board.

Jones: "Develop an informal group of people you can go to for advice, mentors who can help you."

Keep on top of the paperwork.

Jones: "Make sure you're on top of obligations to various government agencies, such as PST, GST, WCB."

"Get good advice, and get it in writing."

Expect the unexpected.

Jones: "Try to the best of your ability to be prepared. The first few years can be really tough."

Cambie construction forced move to greener pastures

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And after struggling with what kind of business to begin, she decided to bring her passion for gardening into a retail shop that sells garden accents and home-decor items in an atmosphere designed to invoke the calm of the outdoors and encourage shoppers to linger.

Cambie Street seemed like the perfect neighbourhood for her shop, even though she knew that

Canada Line construction would cause disruption at station entrances. But she had been assured it would be short-lived and blocks away from her location.

Although she wanted a long lease in order to provide stability for the first few years, she compromised and took over the remaining 15 months of a lease from a consignment store.

That was the lucky part.

"I was getting really good feed-

back about the store, and it was fun, even though it was a lot of hard work," Palmer said. "Then we found out the RAV line was going to be cut-and-cover construction rather than the bored tunnel."

"Location is everything in retail. It is such a delicate business. Rain and snow can impact sales, never mind a 30-foot trench."

Palmer's lease expired on New Year's Eve 2005 and in the fall of that year, she started scouting again

for a new location for the Gardening Circle. This time, she was determined to find a community away from the city.

"The idea of relocating was terrifying — it had taken nine months the first time. I thought it would be my undoing."

The day she decided to check out Fort Langley turned out to be the day of the cranberry festival. Palmer found herself on a quaint main street buzzing with energy and

shoppers who stopped along the sidewalks to visit with neighbours.

She moved the shop on Jan 1.

"It has been great — sales tripled in the first year and I'm able to focus on the creative aspect of running a business," she said. "Fort Langley actually fits the store in a better way, but I probably wouldn't have moved if it wasn't for the Canada Line. I'm one of the success stories."

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