

Technology helps firms take offerings to higher level, compete with larger rivals

Companies see growth by developing low-cost solutions for customers

By Ann Meyer | Special to the Tribune
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With firsthand knowledge of what her clients need, Jennifer Bertoglio has morphed her legal staffing firm into a fast-growing, full-service, technology-based legal services business.

Bertoglio, a one-time paralegal who later became a corporate litigator, knows how time consuming the discovery phase of legal work can be.

"I saw how these cases became all consuming and a drastic drain on resources for corporate America to defend them," she said.

So she founded LawyerLink in 2005 to offer contract staffing services that would save clients time and money, then added technology-based eDiscovery services for further efficiency.

By identifying customers' pressure points and developing low-cost solutions through technology, small entrepreneurial businesses can compete head to head with larger, established businesses. It takes a commitment to changing the way things have been done and a willingness to try something new.

Bertoglio doesn't mind a little risk.

"You only advance if you're willing to jump off that cliff and build your wings along the way. Only then can you take flight," she said.

But Bertoglio is also analytical and methodical, which helped to reduce the likelihood of failure as she forged new ground.

"Jennifer had all the pieces in place to make her risks not so risky," said Patricia Joseph, managing director of product-development firm Prospex Network Inc., who advised LawyerLink through the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center's Athena PowerLink program. "She listened to her clients."

As a result, LawyerLink's sales have more than doubled over the past 12 months, and it plans to expand its staff of 60 workers, which includes more than 20 lawyers. To keep up with the growth, LawyerLink expanded its Chicago offices to 15,000 square feet, up from 600 square feet a few years ago. It also has an office in Houston.

Nicole Loftus, founder of Zorch International, is another Chicago entrepreneur who has redefined a category by adding technology. Her promotional-products business lets corporate customers talk directly to manufacturers and place orders online, eliminating the middleman and cutting between 25 percent and 65 percent of the cost of promotional coffee mugs, baseball hats, pens and the like, Loftus said.

The direct approach meant shaking up a business sector that had been accustomed to supporting distributors.

"I was not afraid of the risk because I was so sure of this model being better for our industry," said Loftus, who previously worked for another promotional-products company and was frustrated with the industry's complacency.

Some companies didn't understand the need, saying, "That's just the way things are done, why change them," Loftus said. But the potential savings won over corporations, which can save millions of dollars by using Zorch instead of a traditional promotional-products company, she said.

By connecting corporations that need products with the manufacturer producing them, less time is wasted and fewer errors occur. Loftus compares Zorch's collaborative model with that of Orbitz, which hooks up travelers directly to airlines to get the best prices. Zorch contributes creative ideas and brand protection through a secure online library of corporate artwork.

"We've turned a \$19 billion industry on its head," Loftus said.

After a fourfold sales increase in 2007, the tough economy has contributed to slower growth, giving Zorch time to develop new business ideas, Loftus said. Zorch plans to expand to print brochures and corporate signage.

Like Zorch, LawyerLink experienced rapid growth by streamlining an existing business process to reduce costs. At the end of 2007, it opened a project center, offering lawyers, space, technology and process systems, after clients wanted to outsource the entire document review process.

"We manage the data behind the scenes, from IT to management of people. If you think of every department that might exist in a large corporation, we bundle that together," Bertoglio said.

This year, at the advice of the advisory panel, LawyerLink expanded to include technology and consulting. "It was very important to have this panel of experts together so we could look at this issue very comfortably to ensure this was the best next step for our company's growth," Bertoglio said.

It uses software for eDiscovery, which by searching for keywords helps reduce the number of documents that lawyers need to read. Then it adds the professional expertise of a lawyer, differentiating it from technology firms that offer only eDiscovery processing.

The combination meets clients' existing needs and is propelling the company's growth, said Zana Pimentel, a business lawyer and consultant who served on the PowerLink advisory panel.

Bertoglio also includes lean principles, such as those used by manufacturers, to eliminate waste in her operations.

"We have a continuous quality-control process. Our mission is LawyerLink lean, doing it right the first time," she said. "We look at the least amount of hands, the least amount of times someone needs to touch a document."

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BUSINESS

MINDING YOUR BUSINESS

Adding technology lets firms take the next step

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By Ann Meyer
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ABEL URIBE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

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