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Technological, Methodological, Economic & Business Changes Impacting MR

# MR Vet Breaks All the “Rules” in Her New Consulting Venture

One of the hot U.S. employment zones these days is the business startup. The U.S. Small Business Administration reports 5.2 million were in operation as of this past March, up from an average 4.4 million in the 1999-2001 period. Continuing instability in the corporate job market and a desire for independence has prompted some market researchers who have long dreamt of venturing out on their own to finally take the plunge.

Kelley Styring is living that dream, having resigned last spring as Frito-Lay's (Plano, TX) Director-Retail and Marketplace Strategy & Insights to start Insightfarm Inc., a research and consumer strategy consultancy. Abstaining from the traditional startup, which would have meant setting up Insightfarm in Dallas--hold on to your BlackBerry!--she and her family relocated almost 2,000 miles away to a 40-acre farm in Newberg, OR. Insightfarm's lone connection to the world is a triple-duty phone, fax and dial-up Internet line. "It's like Green Acres meets The Simple Life," Styring joked. "I turned in my Lexus for a tractor and a '92 Honda."

Her cultural leap from MR client to supplier faced the expected obstacles of all new businesses--and a few Styring (in her first startup) didn't anticipate. Still, from 30 miles outside Portland, the intelligence, innovation, perseverance, flexibility, self-confidence and spirit that fed her outstanding corporate research performance is constructing Insightfarm's foundation for success.

"From my background, I understand the typical corporate research director's overwhelming responsibilities. Very often, one's plate is full with immediate decision-making research, and fewer resources are available for integrated analysis and consumer strategy, even though these activities can have higher impact," she said. "For me, 'consumer insight' is more about building strategy than making decisions. The supplier side made sense to me because I know how consumer trends and business knowledge can impact growth. I made a point of highlighting that in our tagline: 'consumer knowledge to get you growing'."

Just two years ago, Styring was a gregarious change agent

rapidly moving up the ladder at Frito-Lay and fast-approaching the personal entitlement to select future employers and name her price. Why risk it all in her own venture?

"At that time, my husband and I sat down and discussed why--with two beautiful, happy children, a big house and our careers on fire--we were struggling to be happy. We agreed we wanted more quality from life. We wanted to integrate work and family as completely as possible and decided life in the country could

make that happen. My husband would grow a vineyard and start a winery in the barn. And I would run my consultancy; an 'army of one.' We thought if we sold everything we owned, bought a farm and lived really frugally, we might just be able to make things work.

"I also wanted to get back to the work I love," Styring stated. "American business rewards technical expertise and success with management responsibility. I learned a lot while responsible for people and budgets, but I did less and less insight work and more and more program building, recruiting, retention, etc. With Insightfarm, I can really do what I enjoy--collect disparate pieces of knowledge to build ideas for companies."



Insightfarm President Kelley Styring

Styring defines her principal skill as "connecting the dots between people and knowledge to build bigger things." It's a simple concept, yet something Styring claims even innovative companies like Frito-Lay's parent, PepsiCo, struggle to consistently implement because of a lack of time or corporate focus. If marquis companies like PepsiCo lacked dedicated resources, Styring wondered about opportunities at smaller American companies. She bet her family's financial future on her gut feeling that they did exist. She leveraged her skills, industry connections and personable style to attract a client roster of world-class companies, large and small, and created a core of Insightfarm clients in cpg, apparel, baby care and fitness equipment.

Setting up shop on the farm was unsettling at first. "Just the process of making this life-altering decision was arduous," Styring declared. "The whole first year was really a test."

Insightfarm took time to begin to experience a revenue flow, something she was financially, but not emotionally, prepared for. “My Insightfarm announcement went out and I waited for the phone to ring--but it didn’t for almost six months,” she said.

The slow start caused Styring to question her business--and herself. “I suffered from the ‘imposter complex’: Maybe I wasn’t really as smart as people thought I was, maybe I didn’t really know what I was doing and the veil was going to be lifted to reveal the emperor with no clothes,” she recalled. “So much of my self-esteem was tied to my corporate position. I had to redefine myself.”

Styring also needed a more aggressive sales approach. “Once I have someone’s ear, I’m great at selling my ideas, but I had to start selling myself a bit,” she shared. “Cold calling, getting to the right person and talking up my abilities was really uncomfortable. I’d love to devote all my time to research, but I must set aside time for calls.”

framework for strategies and innovations and built test programs to fill any data gaps. I helped Precor set priorities and plans for approaching new markets and I pushed the right mix of strategic work and everyday consumer research.”

One budding Insightfarm service not in her original plans came straight out of a client need. “Former Frito-Lay MR Director Lynda Firey-Oldroyd recommended me to Levi Strauss, which asked me to develop what I call an ‘Insight to Action Workshop.’ It helps users of MR data leverage information into insight,” Styring said. “It highlights three main ideas: insights that motivate, insights with impact and insights with the power of imagination. It’s a very dynamic and interactive workshop.

“I teach participants to get more from data by attacking it in different ways,” she added. “I give examples of innovations and ask attendees to imagine the consumer insights that led to them. I explain that research happens in one of two ways: theoretically,

Styring: “What really sets me apart are my opinions about insights--what they mean and recommendations about what the business could and should do. Consultants have great ideas but often censor themselves, fearful to go out on a limb to speak their minds.”

Her thick “little black book” was golden. “I tracked down former employers, co-workers and old contacts,” she shared. Doing so lifted her spirits. “Being on my own crystallized the value of my network. So far, former employers have constituted 50% of my client work. The other 50% has come from their referrals--it’s like a diaspora. That’s eased my fear of selling, although referral calls to unknown companies still make me uneasy.” Nonetheless, she claims to convert roughly half of those referrals.

PepsiCo (Purchase, NY), for instance, has become one of Insightfarm’s biggest clients--and its exclusive food and beverage customer. “I’m working for PepsiCo divisions like Quaker and Tropicana, with people I didn’t previously know,” she revealed. “Ninety percent of my work for them is helping balance their portfolio across divisions with insights. I have helped them very efficiently create cross-division sharing and touchpoints.”

A former PepsiCo marketing peer had joined Precor (Woodinville, WA), the fitness equipment manufacturer, and asked Styring for major assistance. “Precor is a very small company and has a top-notch marketing department, but doesn’t have an MR department; I’m it. I do everything from basic nuts and bolts to more sophisticated analyses.

“Precor called me to help understand their broader market potential,” Styring continued. “First, I identified what they knew from external trends and their own data, what they didn’t know, what they needed to know and what they could do with that in the future. By analyzing existing information, I provided a

where you have an idea you’re trying to prove or disprove; and empirically, where you dig through all the information and come up with an ‘ah-ha.’ Though 80% of research funding is spent on proving hypotheses, 80% of growth comes from the ah-ha’s. So I guide them toward ah-ha building. The ‘Insight to Action Workshop’ began as a three-day event, but its success led me to compress it into six hours and roll it out with four clients’ key marketing, R&D and insights personnel.”

Styring also coaches clients on varied methods of volume forecasting for M&A opportunities, new products or target markets and internal forecasting. She says it helps them “put a harness around the number-jockeying that goes on” in marketing departments that don’t employ MR forecasting tools. “I’m quite adept at M&A due diligence and very well-versed in marketing mix and basic advertising testing and product qualifications,” she stated. Other client work has built consumer-based innovation platforms, measured the value of marketing programs, attached a monetary value to online communities, arranged programs to qualify initiatives and filled gaps left by employees on leave (such as maternity).

Motivated to take the ‘high road’ with clients, Styring’s pricing structure is completely transparent. “My proposal has a line item for each vendor I’ve hired for the client,” she remarked. “I don’t mark up vendor costs. I forfeit additional income, but I prove to clients that each vendor is the right one for the project. And I trust vendors to interact with clients and to be paid directly by them.”

Gumption differentiates this entrepreneur, but there’s much

more. “My depth and variety of experiences with real products in real markets, plus my vast network of resources, distinguishes me from other MR consultancies,” Styring asserted. “My supplier access helps bring the best staff-person from the best company to a project. But what really sets me apart are my opinions about insights--what they mean and recommendations about what the business could and should do. Consultants have great ideas, but often censor themselves, fearful to go out on a limb to speak their minds, even when they’re stocked with more knowledge than anyone else. That’s the power of my workshop’s imagination segment. Ideas that come from people steeped in consumer insight have a higher probability of success. They come from knowledge and affinity for the customer.”

Styring’s busy, fertile mind keeps her on the ball. “I never want to be vanilla. I have a list, a dream sheet of things I’d like to do. Just as I did at Frito-Lay and P&G, I want to ‘sell’ those ideas to my clients. For instance, I’m currently authoring an exciting syndicated study for Packaged Facts (New York, NY) and Wharf Research (San Francisco, CA). With my non-competitive client roster, I could unite clients at a symposium or in benchmarking. Collectively, we could see people-information connections that we can’t individually.”

Travel is near the top of the one-person operation’s challenges. “How do you account for that time?” she asked, “and assure you continue to meet clients needs? My biggest problem is feeling lonely and out of the loop. There’s no water cooler to kick ideas around. I must invest time and effort to keep my skills up and my learning level high. It’s incumbent upon me to read industry publications and participate in conferences to avoid becoming stagnant.”

Still, overall, she enjoys life from her tranquil, solitary “office” that overlooks the Styring family apple orchard. “A friend asked how I would replace my Frito salary. I haven’t replaced it; I’ve changed my currency to time, flexibility and freedom. I have freedom over my type and variety of work. I can attend every event at my childrens’ school and they don’t go to daycare. In our new mindset, the big house and fancy car aren’t so important,” she explained.

Styring has high hopes and big plans. “I want my workshop at more world-class companies so they can leverage the power of insights and unleash their people’s potential,” she said. “I want to take Insightfarm to the next level. I may go after my Ph.D. Oh, and I’m working on a book of amusing tales from the farm.” **RBR**

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