

DIVINE INTERVENTION

Not long after giving birth to her third daughter, Dena Blackman had the vision and foresight to establish Dial-an-Angel. Forty three years on and her daughter Danielle Robertson is intent on taking the business to new heights.

Combining good timing, foresight, drive and talent Dena Blackman set the scene for Dial-an-Angel home care services more than four decades ago. However what she perhaps did not foresee was the runaway success of her business, which in today's fast paced world is proving more necessary than ever.

The numbers tell the story: all up 11,000 registered angels provide more than 40,000 clients with housekeeping and cleaning, gardening, childcare, pet care, in-home aged care, nursing and palliative care services. To cater for such, Dial-an-Angel employs 50 full-time office staff and operates 11 offices around Australia, four of which are franchises.

The raison d'être is to make life a little easier for others, an ironic twist on the company's genesis which dates back to 1967 when Dena sought help in vain shortly after giving birth. Her need – call it desperation – triggered plans for a solution to those in a similar predicament and thus Dial-an-Angel home care services was born.

Decades down the track and demand is hotter than ever, says Danielle Robertson who took over the reins from her mother Dena in 2003 after serving a 17 year 'apprenticeship' and rising to finance director.

Under her direction Dial-an-Angel offices were fully integrated in 2005, enabling web based programs and systems to connect all

offices, and the business successfully employs a combination of Search Engine Optimisation and Search Engine Marketing.

An Angel just one click away

"Our website is fully optimised to make sure that Angels and clients can find us. It really makes us available to the marketplace twenty four seven," said Danielle. "Search Engine Marketing through advertising has increased our exposure and now as we head into the field of Social Networking Marketing a whole new channel to market has opened up for us.

"The Internet has given us the opportunity to address our different marketing segments at a very low cost per contact and we can really personalise the communication for each industry."

Insatiable demand

Prudently the name 'Click-an-Angel' has been registered, although with the high volume of incoming calls the 'dial' in the business name remains valid. "The phones run hot from 8.30 in the morning until 8.30 at night, seven days a week. In a typical day we receive more than 300 calls just in one office," said Danielle, adding that enquiries were particularly strong for domestic cleaners, nannies/babysitters and aged care helpers, with more people wanting to stay put in their own homes.

"Our wow factor is our premium service and one-stop-shop for all in-home care and family needs," said Danielle, who revealed that just two in 100 applicants who apply to Dial-an-Angel make the grade as Angels. Shortages arise from the high vetting standards which deliver mixed blessings: they guarantee consistency and reliable services, but boost demand and put more pressure on the Agency. "Demand constantly outweighs supply; it's like having a shop with no stock. Over the past 36 months business has been extraordinarily hard because of the difficulty in getting [more] quality Angels."

Yet there is a large pool of untapped potential for the business to grow even more, as Danielle explains. "We started looking at corporate services fifteen years ago but haven't even touched the surface dealing with top law firms, insurance firms, brokers, financial advisers, accountants, banks and other corporations who want to retain and reward their employees. Based on keeping professionals in work it's a no brainer... we haven't even marketed this. Many forward thinking law firms and corporations have approached us to provide emergency support staff for child care, elder care and domestic assistance."

Overhaul

Danielle is spearheading a series of key developments, paving the way for greater efficiencies in anticipation of busier years and in



Danielle Robertson (left) remarks on the still-untapped potential for the business founded by her mother Dena Blackman

a bid to fend off aspiring rivals (many of whom are short-lived, defeated by the complexity involved in match-making services). In recent times she has pitched in 80-hour weeks overhauling the IT infrastructure and operational processes under a strategic plan.

"We got to a point where we could not move ahead without professionalising our services further. Under the strategic plan we have brought in an external CFO and a new finance manager. We have moved our current Finance Manager (she's been with the company 10 years) into an Operations role. We [also] have our marketing plan ready to go and it is an area of business I want to develop myself in conjunction with Dena who is not only our founder but is our 'Brand Ambassador'.

"Every part of the operation has been reviewed and streamlined, I looked at every aspect of the business and had a big clean out. Many staff are long serving and that makes it harder to implement change... there can be some resistance," Danielle said. "But I did not want to see a business established 40 years go downhill. I'm very passionate about the business and have a very clear vision of the future... I have a massive mind map that we are working through to ensure we are here for the next forty-plus years."

Hits and misses

The all-inclusive review threw up some nasty surprises, revealing for instance that although website hits reached 12,000 or more each month, the conversion rate stood at just one per cent.

"I managed to push that up to 30 per cent over a three month period by responding personally to every single email... I got in and got my hands dirty in order to change the business around. Over the past twelve months I've pushed myself well out of my comfort zone [but] seeing the light at end of tunnel, that makes it worthwhile."

Dena's delight

Clearly, Danielle is proving a remarkable tour de force, but what does her mother and company founder Dena Blackman think of the business evolution? Apparently it gets the thumbs up.

"She's very supportive and is a tower of strength. She has actually encouraged all the changes even though it has been quite daunting for her thinking 'gosh we used to have such a nice little business and now look what we've got'... but she is very excited about where the business is heading. We conducted a strategic session in October last year and she came out buzzing saying "I hope I live long enough to see it all take place!"

Paying tribute to her mother Danielle remarked that Dena "achieved something truly remarkable ... back in 1967 women just didn't start businesses! Back then the law demanded women resign from work once they got married!"

Dena these days chairs the monthly board meeting, attends Board of Management meetings and spends a couple of days a week in the office when not travelling overseas. She is Brand Ambassador as who better can speak about Dial-an-Angel. Her forte is in penning words. "So I hand her huge amount of web content to read and fix... but essentially she has retired." She is also being encouraged to write her autobiography.

Family circle

For 20 years Dena's eldest daughter Nadine ran Dial-an-Angel's Brisbane office but recently elected to retire, making way for her 21-year-old daughter Alysha Broit to manage the branch. A qualified child care worker, Alysha is now learning the ropes of managerial duties.

Back in the mid '80s Dena's other daughter, Nicki also worked for Dial-an-Angel but decided to move on, and her son Braddon is a builder near Cairns.

For her part, Danielle studied hotel management 24 years ago and as a 19-year-old was working a gruelling 70-hour week for a prominent hotel chain. "The pay was very poor so left the hospitality industry and I agreed to a three-month trial working alongside Dena and never looked back!"

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Tapping into support networks

Having taken to the role of CEO like a duck to water, Danielle has been dubbed by some as a superwoman. But to avoid the feelings of isolation that inevitably arise at the top, Danielle has tuned into the "invaluable" support of The Executive Connection.

"I needed assistance in looking at the bigger picture. The TEC chairman and forum group are almost like my extended board, we nut things out, I take along my problems and we discuss them in confidence. It's almost like having an additional external mentor."

TEC advisory services are complemented by FBA's Business Practice workshops.

Danielle also finds time acting as a Justice of the Peace and motivational speaker. The advice offered when addressing business groups? "Always grab opportunities as you see them, employ people who are smarter than yourself because you cannot do everything, and take time to smell the roses."

She concedes to being well organised and successfully maintains a balanced lifestyle with a domestic routine that "runs like clockwork" aided by her husband Paul who picks up domestic duties involved in raising two teens despite working six days a week in his own Steel Fabrication business.

Next genners

"My 17-year-old daughter is considering law or architecture and my advice to her is if you study law or accounting you can do just about anything," said Danielle, adding her gregarious and social 14-year-old son "perhaps would be good at business development in the long-term.

"If either of them feels they can make a contribution to the business I would welcome them in, but I'd prefer they get an education and work elsewhere before joining the business.

"My mantra is O for opportunity, and to take very opportunity you are given. No matter what, just do it, even if you are out of your comfort zone just do it. If you fail just pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep going."

Dare we say that sort of dusting is one service Angels do not provide, but given the business expansion who knows what lies ahead?

For more information: www.dialanangel.com