

The just-bold-enough move

By Shia Kapos

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Fresh out of college in 1976 with a fine arts degree, Maureen Schulman had big plans for herself: She set her sights on working for J. Walter Thompson, a legend in the advertising business in its day.

The fact that she doubted she could snare an interview was merely a bump in the road.

"I did my research, and then I put on a skirt suit and headed for the John Hancock Building," she says. "I rode the elevator until someone pushed one of the buttons for Thompson. I said, 'Hi, I just graduated and I want to work at J. Walter Thompson.' "

The guy on the elevator was a senior account executive. He escorted her into the offices, and she was hired the same day for an entry-level position.

"It changed my life," says Ms. Schulman, 55, who went on to earn a master's degree in advertising from Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. She now runs her own marketing company and oversees the advertising and branding of Eli's Cheesecake, which was founded by her father-in-law, Eli Schulman.

A bold move is a delicate art in business. It can't be too over-the-top; after all, it's best not to embarrass yourself. But a touch of moxie helps make an impact, or create an opportunity where one might not have existed otherwise.

Experts say such moves can be smart, especially in a recession, but only if they come across as appropriate.

"Bold moves can be smart or stupid, depending on how they're done," says Susan Annunzio, president and CEO of the Chicago-based Center for High Performance, a workplace consultancy.

"If you have a job and want a promotion, you have to think more carefully because you have more to lose. But if you want a job, you have nothing to lose," she says. "That's especially the case in today's marketplace. Being more creative may help you stand out in front of 150 résumés."

She recalls a client who had tried numerous avenues to get a job at a Chicago-based company. "He kept trying to get to the CEO but couldn't reach him. So he finally sent him a personally delivered T-shirt. On one side it said ' — happens.' On the other side, it said 'Some know how to turn it into fertilizer.'

"The CEO called, and he was hired. It was a calculated risk, but he had researched it and took an educated guess that the CEO would respond."

Charise Studesville took a chance to jump-start a film career after hearing a story about Hollywood producer Shonda Rhimes ("Grey's Anatomy") at a luncheon at Northwestern.

The speaker, Debra Martin Chase of Martin Chase Productions, "talked about how you have to be bold and be willing to humble yourself and willing to work your way up," Ms. Studesville says. "Hearing her story (about Ms. Rhimes), she made it seem possible."

So Ms. Studesville called Ms. Chase's Hollywood office the next day and won an interview. Soon after, she took a three-day-a-week internship at the company — even though it was in California and she was raising

four children in Chicago.

For seven months, she traveled back and forth to Hollywood for the internship, setting up an intricate support network to help her attorney husband manage the household.

"It was difficult, but my husband learned a lot of things about what I do," she says. Her move taught her older children something, too. "They saw that if there's something you want to do, you just put your mind to it."

Now, she has her own production company and a short film that is making its way through this year's film-festival circuit.

REAL ATTITUDE

Kathleen Weiss Boyle, a real estate agent at Century 21 McMullen Real Estate Inc. in Chicago, says she strategically draws notice for what she wears — an interesting accent piece on her lapel, perhaps — or the way she speaks. "I usually hang back, and when the opportunity presents itself, I'll throw out something that's a little wild or personal or exuberant, something that people might not expect."

She recalls a job interview when she was just starting out; to add some gravitas during her discussion with the CEO, she made him focus on her eyeglasses.

I would "dramatically remove them and wave them at the CEO to drive my point home," Ms. Boyle, 46, says. "I wanted to be able to make him look upward on command, right into my eyes, so he could see that knowledge, ability and experience were also wrapped up in that ambitious little package."

She got the job — and a couple of promotions during her five years with the company — before revealing to the CEO that the smart-girl glasses were merely a prop. "They were called 'attitude glasses' back in the 1980s," she recalls.

Ms. Boyle concedes the fake specs probably were "cheesy," but seizing attention in small ways is a must, she says.

"Timid doesn't work," she says. "When you're timid in sales, it comes across as a lack of confidence or a lack of knowledge or experience. When you are bold, you send a message that you're willing to do anything to meet a client's goals."

Some strivers find that meeting other Chicagoans on different turf can get them noticed in a way they aren't at home — even if it's on their own dime.

OUT-OF-TOWN APPROACH

Dan Arriola's Wood Dale-based Inktel Direct Corp., which he owns with his brother, had failed to win an account with a national charity when it was a young firm.

Right after the loss, Mr. Arriola was in Miami on business when he learned the head of the charity was there for a conference.



Charise Studesville talked her way into a film internship in Hollywood — even though it required a commute from Chicago. Photo: Erik Unger

"I tracked him down at his hotel and called him to go to dinner," Mr. Arriola says. "He said, 'You know the job has gone to someone else, and we don't plan on changing.' I said I wanted to meet anyway."

The two ate tapas, shared thoughts on business and parted ways. Nine months later, when the winning company failed to follow through, Mr. Arriola got a call. The two organizations have been doing business together for four years now.

"I think he thought I was a little crazy" to seemingly follow him to Miami, says Mr. Arriola, 33. "But in the long run, it made our relationship better because he saw our commitment."

His firm has grown from a dozen employees to 100: "Before we landed this client, we had only a few non-profits. Today, we have over 20 non-profit clients, including some of the top charities in the Chicago area."

Chicago entrepreneur Yvonne McGinnis, president of We're Cleaning Inc., booked a flight to China last year at the same time Chicago's 2016 Olympics bid committee was touring sites after Beijing's Summer Games.

She wanted to supply trash bags made by her company to a possible Chicago Olympics and thought the best way to get noticed would be to join the group on her own dime. "I wanted to work for the Olympics; I wanted to show them my commitment," she says.

Ms. McGinnis got face time with Chicago business executives and aldermen by paying her own way to join the numerous tours they took around China. In between stops at Beijing's Temple of Heaven and the Great Wall, she talked up her business.

The pricey trip didn't elicit a job offer — and, of course, the Olympics bid didn't pan out at all — but Ms. McGinnis remains hopeful.

"I met some great people and am still in touch with a few of them," she says. "You never know what it can lead to."

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