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## Digital Shift



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Christine Dobby, National Post · Nov. 6, 2012 | Last Updated: Nov. 6, 2012 1:03 AM ET

Elizabeth Gage was running an advertising placement agency with more than \$6 million in sales in 2008 when everything fell apart. What followed was painful, but the disintegration and subsequent rebirth of the Winnipeg-based entrepreneur's business hinged on a digital transformation strategy, one that the ad market's biggest player, Yellow Media Inc., has been unable to accomplish despite years of trying.

Ironically, it was the loss of Yellow Media's business that forced Gage to reinvent her company. She started Prairie Choice Marketing in 1995, but changed the name to PCM International Inc. when she landed a client in the United States. Her business sold print directory ads for Yellow Media (then known as Yellow Pages), earning a commission for the placement of national ads as a certified marketing representative for the Montreal-based company. Gage originally sold advertising for a number of different directory companies, but Yellow Pages eventually acquired most of its competition.

That didn't trouble Gage at the time because her business was dramatically growing, with revenues doubling from about

\$3 million in 2005 to \$6.4 million in 2008, the same year the Women Business Owners of Manitoba gave her two awards for overall excellence and building business.

However, a billing dispute with Yellow Pages led to the end of their relationship and left Gage's company in limbo. Without a revenue stream, she was forced to lay off everyone on her staff of about a dozen workers. Her personal relationships suffered, her marriage broke down and she lost friends. But she found support from relative strangers who had been on the periphery of her life and worked to rebuild her company (see sidebar, pg. 88) and take care of her two young children.

Prior to the loss of the Yellow Pages print ads, Gage had been working on an Internet search marketing tool. At the time the words "search engine optimization" were unfamiliar to most. In 2005, she started PCM Interactive Inc., a side business that advised a few clients on a test basis on how to make it easy for customers to find them on the Internet and how to tailor their websites to convert visits into sales. She was also using analytics to measure traffic and demonstrate where success was coming from.

"We had this fledgling thing going," says Gage, recalling how she shifted her focus to Internet marketing after the Yellow Pages business ended. She has since started a second related business, Sonic Mobile Canada, which capitalizes on the growing importance of mobile devices in the marketing industry through, for example, mobile websites and text messaging campaigns.

"The business model today is an integrated marketing approach, and more of the focus is on mobile because the search space is so cluttered," Gage says. "Ultimately, the social aspect of marketing is a huge change to how people source products and mobile is the connection to that."

She has just two full-time employees, apart from herself, and her revenues are smaller than they were in her business's previous life. But Gage has rebuilt her client roster to a healthy 18 and she's philosophical about her journey back into profitability.

"I learned forgiveness and acceptance," she says. "This is an important part of the entrepreneurial cycle and this is what allows you a successful restart."

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