

Comeback Kid

WHEN JASON RAYMAN GOT DOTCOM-DOWNSIZED, HE FINALLY DID THE SENSIBLE THING — STARTED HIS OWN BUSINESS.

By Jason Rayman

I was on top of the world. I'd spent the past year working for the Internet division of telecommunications giant BellSouth, and as 1999 drew to a close, my career seemed limitless. I had just earned a boffo promotion that opened vast opportunities; I was making more money than I needed and taking advantage of BellSouth's super 401(k) plan. Best of all, I loved my job.

My team's mission: seek out local non-profit organizations and provide them with our company's free Web site product. The non-profits received an Internet presence at no cost, and the deal allowed BellSouth to extend its audience via banner ads on the sites. Here I was, improving my community and getting paid for it. The hardest part of the job was convincing these organizations that our service was, in fact, free.

AN INTERNET INSIDER

I was the consummate Internet insider. Armed with my company-issued laptop, my snappy "business casual" wardrobe and a near-limitless budget for promotions and events, I had the option of working from home or BellSouth's public affairs office in Miami. I could come and go as I pleased and worked almost completely independently, since my supervisors were in other cities.

My customers loved me, my friends

envied me and my company gave me glowing reviews, along with generous bonuses and raises.

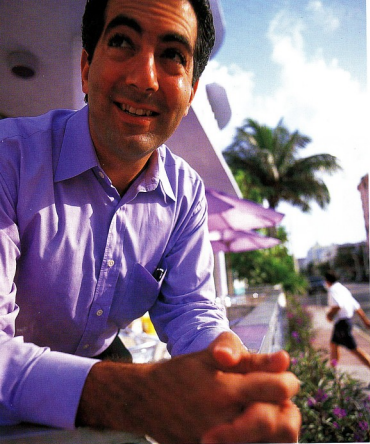
I had paid my dues at other jobs and felt like I'd earned this dream job, trying hard to ignore the voice in my head saying, "This is too good to be true."

REALITY BYTES

By now, you know where this is going. According to **TheStandard.com's** "Layoff Tracker," about 112,000 professionals lost their Internet-related jobs between December 1999 and June 2001.

I became a statistic. First there was concern, then rumors, then fetal position-inducing anxiety. And, ultimately, the dreaded "involuntary separation" — also known as the pink slip ... the axe ... the boot.

I was out the door, joining the swelling ranks of the downsized. I even had to turn in my beloved laptop.



"How did all that severance money disappear so quickly?" asks Jason Rayman.

NOT TO WORRY

Still, I wasn't worried. At age 28, and equipped with experience in Internet marketing and public relations, I surely had marketable skills. Some dynamic, creative organization would offer me an exciting, high-paying job in no time. Besides, I had a nice severance package and some personal savings. Heck, I might as well take a vacation.

All I had to do was post my resume on one of those job sites like **Monster.com** or **HotJobs.com** and wait.

Then a business-owner friend who was moving to California asked me if I would be interested in taking on some marketing projects for a client he had to drop: a local law firm. I accepted, though reluctantly, knowing the call about my next dream job was imminent.

Months went by. After zero job offers,

my confidence was cracking. I checked **Monster**, **HotJobs**, **Headhunter.net** and **Flipdog.com** daily for job opportunities, but few came.

What happened to my "marketability"?

Was there a faux pas on my resume no one was telling me about?

And, yikes, how did all that severance money disappear so quickly?

Suddenly I appreciated my independent contractor gig with the law firm a lot more.

THE GREAT EUREKA

Then the lightbulb clicked on — or perhaps it was more like a thermostat rising slowly. Maybe, instead of working for someone else, I could find more clients and open my own business?

As the idea germinated, I attended a job fair, seeking employment. There I

bumped into another good friend who had opened her own special events and marketing firm seven years earlier. Ironically, it was her company that was producing the job fair. I explained my situation, and she immediately offered a series of projects that would keep me busy for weeks.

Her generosity forced the issue. If I accepted, it would mean setting the job search aside and focusing on the work at hand — in effect, starting my own business.

Was I ready to hang out my own proverbial shingle?

As I asked myself the big question, it occurred to me that I had spent much of my career working independently and that the overhead costs of starting a small firm on my own would be low. I also remembered my mother — a fund-raiser who has run businesses, though without owning them — saying how exciting and enriching it can be to run your own business. I realized I might never have a better opportunity than right now, so I decided to go for it.

TAKE IT FROM ME

Every biz owner learns valuable lessons in the process of getting a business up and running. Here are the five most helpful pieces of advice I can pass along:

1) Have a best friend who's an accountant; or, failing that, make your accountant your new best friend.

The sheer mass of resources offering advice to small biz owners can be overwhelming, including thousands of Web sites, books and other materials. I don't know about you, but when faced with all those choices, I'm never sure where to turn first. Sometimes I just want someone to say, "Look, Jason, do this, then do that, then do this."

Enter my CPA buddy, who explained the ins and outs of starting a business in Florida. He told me what type of corporation I should establish (I opted for an S corp) and directed me to a law firm that

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provides low-cost Florida incorporation services. He then sent the necessary paperwork to the IRS, from which I received my tax identification number, which in turn enabled me to open a business bank account. Simple stuff, really, but then again, not so simple when you're starting out.

While I probably would have figured this out myself, having a human there to filter out the clutter gave me peace of mind. If you don't have an accountant friend, you can always find one at www.cpadirectory.com.

2) Work your network — hard.

When BellSouth cut me loose, I was confident that my network of business contacts wouldn't let me stay unemployed for long. I told the bad news to a select few of them, assuming that the word would spread quickly and my e-mail box would crackle with news of great opportunities.

Yeah. Right!

I soon realized an old lesson runs true: out of sight, out of mind.

I resolved not to make the same mistake when I launched my business. I now attend at least one local event or reception a week, and I distribute mass e-mails whenever I retain a new client or update my Web site. I also work the phone and keep up on important issues.

3) Tell your story.

Most people love to hear stories about comebacks, entrepreneurs and underdogs. In Miami, where technology is still an emerging sector, I find the downsized Internet employee is a bit of a curiosity. So, when asked, I always tell how I've tried to make lemonade out of lemons. If nothing else, this will distinguish my business from all the others and generate a "reconnect" when potential clients later ponder my business card.

4) Start small.

It's tempting to offer everything in your arsenal to land a potential client, but, at first, focus on what you do best. For example, while my background is in public and media relations, all I offer at the moment are what I call "professional writing services," such as press releases, business letters, newsletters and position statements. While I'm sure I could manage a full-blown media campaign, I wouldn't be able to provide the high level of service I'm used to with just me here in the office.

Another benefit of offering a niche service at this point is the comfort level I enjoy with established communications firms who don't consider me a threat (yet). They're more liable to regard me as a friendly specialist, as opposed to a competitor out to steal their business.

The time will come when I'll expand my services and take on the larger firms. For now, however, this works.

5) Take the lead in client/vendor relationships.

When I meet with clients, I arrive with a printed, comprehensive agenda and

establish myself as the person directing the conversation. Clients are usually busy and willing to defer to my initiative.

This positions me as proactive, rather than reactive, to their needs, and it allows me to control the meeting in a way that puts my service in the best light. For example, I once had a number of issues to discuss with a client; one concerned some work I had not yet completed, another showcased something I had done well. By controlling the agenda, I covered the incomplete work early in the meeting and ended with the success story. The client left the meeting feeling upbeat and confident in my service.

So far, my business has been breaking even, which is about what I expected. I still think about the security a job could provide — then realize the last one I had wasn't really "secure" at all.

The experience of starting and operating my own business has been a fascinating and enlightening adventure, and one that everyone should consider taking at some point in their lives. **eb**

Jason Rayman is the president of JDR Communications in Miami Beach, Fla.

MY WEB FAVORITES

Here are some of the small business Web sites that I have found the most helpful in the early stages of operating my own business:

- www.1099.com — This site catering to independent contractors is no longer being updated, but there is a large archive of material worth a look.
- www.smallbusiness.com — At this site, small biz owners trade advice and tips.
- www.freelancehelp.com — The name says it all; products and services to help freelancers.
- www.guru.com — A place where independent contractors can find project opportunities.
- www.bcentral.com — Microsoft's giant site dedicated to the needs of small business.