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# Success from Scratch

Melanie Jeannotte and her sister created **Vital Benefits** to foster opportunities for female businesswomen—both in the office and in other local organizations

By Erin Brereton



When Melanie Jeannotte decided to start her own business, she'd already amassed a significant amount of industry experience working for major Canadian insurers and a midsize consulting firm.

However, she felt that her next career step should be to strike out on her own—and help improve clients' experience in the process.

Thus Jeannotte and her sister, Laura Barkley, launched Vital Benefits Inc. in 2006. The company reviews a company's health or pension programs and designs new, cost-effective programs that align with their corporate strategy.

Jeannotte hoped to provide companies and their employees with a single point of contact for support and advocacy when working with their benefit, insurance, and pension-plan providers.

In Vital Benefits' early days, the sisters' father, a former marketing and sales executive, pitched in to help develop the new company's marketing initiatives. In the healthcare and financial-services industries, Jeannotte says, it isn't uncommon for companies to be passed to family members as parents retire. As such, some industry associates initially assumed Jeannotte's father had started the company decades ago. However, although he helped with Vital Benefits' early promotional efforts, the sisters were the ones driving operations—and growth.

"When we opened our doors, we did not have a single client," Jeannotte says. "We built this business from scratch."

## GAINING GROUND

Jeannotte, who today serves as managing partner and CEO, worked steadily to help the company establish itself in the industry. Since its inception, Vital Benefits has experienced significant growth—ranging from 25 to 40 percent a year—and currently works with more than 100 corporate group clients in Canada.

Jeannotte has also been able to move from being half of a team of two to a top exec with 13 team members.

"We try to stay ahead of the curve," she says. "That's not always possible in a small-business environment, but we know that once we hit certain work-capacity limits, our metrics say that we need to add x number of employees."

Jeannotte uses the industry knowledge she gained from years of working with benefit-, pension-, and insurance-plan providers, as well as her public-speaking skills, to stay personally involved in the company's marketing efforts, which have been a major factor in its growth. "We've always been incredibly disciplined about our marketing strategy, and have been focused on providing education in the marketplace," Jeannotte says.

To that end, Jeannotte participates in an annual breakfast series that Vital Benefits sponsors, which features educational sessions on five different topics. Jeannotte also speaks at conferences about topics, like drug-cost management, and writes about hot legislative and industry updates on the Vital Benefit's blog.

## CREATING A COMMUNITY

The same year that Vital Benefits opened, Jeannotte also started Vital Women, a group that offers female entrepreneurs a forum to share ideas and advice. Although it originally began as a quarterly speaker-based program strictly for female entrepreneurs, Jeannotte eventually decided to open Vital Women up to businesswomen who didn't necessarily own companies.

Participants range from women who run accounting firms and retail stores to immigration attorneys to a woman who runs a bathing-suit-fitting business. The group has also changed its format and no longer exclusively sponsors education-based events.

"We realized over the years that we just want to connect," Jeannotte says. "The most effective events involved networking and chatting in a social environment."

Members of the organization share best-practice advice—and try to hire each other whenever possible.

"We really try to support the women in our group anytime we need services," Jeannotte says.

## CLIENT CONSIDERATIONS

In her free time, Jeannotte has also volunteered with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Calgary and the Children's Cottage Society, a family service provider.

She also believes in giving back as a company, and encourages employees to suggest organizations or issues they care about for a donation program that involves Vital Benefits assigning a portion of pretax profits to community causes.

"I may be the face of the company, but it's the furious paddling of feet under the water that keeps it all rolling smoothly on the surface—and ultimately growing," Jeannotte says.

The success that Vital Benefits has achieved, both in terms of growth and for broader development, was no accident: the company's founders set a five-year goal to reach specific growth targets when it opened.

However, Jeannotte remains committed to her original entrepreneurial goal of providing customers with the best possible experience.

"Managed growth is important to us because we're a service-driven organization," Jeannotte says. "It's not bad to exceed our targets—but only if we can service the new business properly."

### Balancing Act

Three ways to help achieve the ideal work-life balance by Melanie Jeannotte

#### 1. Evaluate your obligations.

Women always have multiple balls in the air. Determine which balls are glass—such as your health or family—and which work issues can be viewed as rubber. Sometimes you have to let a rubber ball bounce to keep the glass ones in the air.

#### 2. Prioritize.

To keep up with work and family demands, social activities sometimes have to take a backseat. You may want to see your girlfriends every week or month—but sometimes that's just not possible.

#### 3. Make peace with your decisions.

So many women carry a lot of guilt about juggling those choices. You have to put away the guilt.

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