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Success Story: Terry Carter: From Law to Luxury Body Care Products

JD Bliss (JDB): You've had a fairly eclectic career path - international business and diplomacy, IP counsel with a technology company, data policy manager with the nation's largest title insurance underwriter in the real estate industry, and now your own business producing a line of luxury spa products. Given such a diversity of interests and pursuits, what originally led you to attend law school?

Carter: My professional goal had always been to be a diplomat. In college as an undergraduate, I majored in international affairs and government, and in the Japanese and French languages. After I graduated I went to work for an agency of the Japanese government, and it was quickly apparent to me that I was largely dealing with concepts and ideas, not tangible results. In the international arena, even if you follow all the appropriate resolutions and protocols, the objective you work to accomplish often remains vague. It was to get involved in something more concrete that I decided to go to law school, with the ultimate objective of running my own company. I went to Washington College of Law at the American University in Washington, DC, and received my J.D. degree in 1998.

JDB: Although you had the goal of being an entrepreneur, you entered practice as an in-house counsel in the technology industry. Where did you work and what were your responsibilities?

Carter: I still had my personal business goals, but I found that law school teaches you the "what" but not the "how" about law and business, and I wanted to have more direct business training. The technology industry was booming and gave me a front row seat to many start-up deals. I went to work for a medium-sized technology company in Southern California, My primary focus was IP, marketing and trademarks. I left that company and moved into a non-legal regulatory role at Fidelity National Financial where I worked on data policy and privacy issues. I especially liked the challenge of privacy matters because they were new and on the cutting edge.

JDB: What did you find most and least satisfying about being a lawyer?

Carter: I enjoyed the mental challenge of the law and the erudition that it requires. I didn't like the arrogance, meanness and haughtiness I too often saw among lawyers. I'm certainly not a lawyer who dislikes the profession, but my goal was always to work with people and get things done – negotiate the deal and move forward. When others disagreed over legal points for the sake of disagreement, I found it petty. I realized that I needed a break when a peer complimented me on how well I handled a meeting that had turned hostile. I hadn't even noticed that because I had come to expect hostility and antagonism as the norm.

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JDB: How did you approach the issue of breaking away from the negative aspects of your practice?

Carter: Work / life balance is a concept I've always thought important. I truly believe that people should be good to themselves, and think it's regrettable that so many people are not. I had found that spas are good places to relax and reinvigorate, and I used the spa experience to unwind from the stress of my practice. Because I wanted to share something of that with my friends, and because I needed my own creative outlet, it led to my venture to develop and market spa products.

JDB: That seems like such a major undertaking – how did you get started?

Carter: The real beginning goes back to my longstanding interest in science. I had started out as a pre-med major in college, and had taken biology courses in plant science. Strictly as a personal pursuit and as a means of sharing with others, almost three years ago I began using botanical and other natural ingredients to make spa-type products – for example, body washes and hand creams – as small gifts for my friends. I didn't want them to know that I'd made the products, so I asked my friend James Lundberg, a graphic artist, to make some product labels that didn't identify me at all. The feedback that I got was very positive and also very honest, because nobody had to spare my feelings if they didn't like the products. After a year of experimentation with these spa products my old dream of starting my own company began to seem more possible. I had made good money as a lawyer and had a solid financial base, I was single and had an affordable mortgage. I felt I had good business knowledge and experience – certainly by working in technology and with Fidelity National Financial, I saw some of the best marketing in the world and was familiar with all types of marketing collateral. I went to the major spa products trade show to learn more about the industry. In short, about a year and a half ago, the time seemed right for me to leave Fidelity and found Travertine Spa, Inc. I kept my business base in Los Angeles, where I lived and worked.

JDB: What's the significance of your company's name?

Carter: I definitely felt my products would appeal to an upscale clientele, and for these people the word would inspire thoughts of the fine travertine marble that is found in many custom homes in the LA area. I used my trademark knowledge to equate the exquisite quality and desirability of Travertine marble to my product. When I conceived of my potential client base I thought of people like myself – men and women who are accomplished, selective, need to take care of themselves – and knew the market was there. A good example of my target client is the model pictured on the "About Us" page of our web site, www.travertinespa.com. She is a very striking woman and resonates with our clientele. She's also a corporate executive in San Francisco, a wife and mother, and a marathon runner.

JDB: What products have you developed to reach that kind of customer, and how do you handle production and marketing?

Carter: Today we have a line of well over 20 luxury body-care and aromatherapy spa products for men and women. Our products for the body and home are made with steam-distilled or cold-pressed essential oils, botanicals and organic ingredients, and include hand cream, body wash, massage products and linen spray. We sell them both to upscale salons and spas, and directly to individuals through our web site. Now the production is outsourced and is done to the highest quality standards. Anything less simply wouldn't work with the customers we've targeted. Most of our budget is spent on marketing. Phil Cohen does our photography. Julie Wu, also a talented photographer and web designer, is responsible for our web site. I work on general administrative and management matters, do personal marketing at trade shows and in other venues, meet with our celebrity clients and apply my experience to trademark issues.

JDB: As someone who had wanted to own your own company, has your entrepreneurial experience been a satisfying one? And what directions do you see it heading?

Carter: It's been even more satisfying than I imagined – I love the flexibility and the excitement, and the creative outlet that it provides. It's been a total learning process, but I've grown as a person because of it. I have certain long-term objectives, such as developing a complementary apparel line and opening our own luxury spa and resort. But right now I'm enjoying the ongoing efforts to build and establish our product line. I currently am preparing our marketing for this year's pre-Oscar party in Beverly Hills where nominees come for pampering and relaxation.

JDB: Based on your own success, what advice would you give to attorneys who are dissatisfied with their practice but reluctant to strike out in a new direction?

Carter: I would say, just do it – answer the question, “If I could be anything it would be . . .” and then go in that direction. People often say they don't know what their passion is. The fact is that they do know, but are reluctant to pursue it because they see only roadblocks. My passion is simple: be true to yourself and treat yourself well. Reinforcing that for me is that I've lost four family members in the past year, including my mother and realize more than ever how short life it – too short to say, “I can't” or “I'm afraid.” Whatever your passion is, only you can make the commitment to pursue it. Once you get through the mental roadblocks and fear, the entrepreneurial experience can be one of inexpressible joy.