



Developing a firm in today's business environment presents a host of new challenges. Calum Robson talks to three entrepreneurial practice directors.

building a modern practice

■ Today's business world is characterised by rapid change, and the most successful service providers are those that respond to the impact of change on their clients' needs. For small and medium sized accounting firms, technology now looks after routine bookkeeping and tax tasks that used to be their bread-and-butter.

Yet the same clients who are automating their day-to-day accounts must also deal with increasingly perplexing regulations, while retaining their competitive edge. What opportunities does that offer growing practices?

making life easier

Alan Woods is a director of Wood Squared, a Merseyside firm that markets itself as a specialist in business growth. He believes the firm should work with owner-managers to help them achieve their business and

personal goals: "We want to provide the complete solution," he says. "That means getting involved in their everyday work, highlighting key performance indicators and helping them to hit targets. And where targets are being missed, we examine why and devise an action plan to address problems."

It's an approach that has been welcomed by clients. "It helps that we're a new practice," says Woods. "We don't have a history of doing anything different, so from the start of our contact with clients, it's what they come to expect. Start-ups and younger businesses are often more receptive to the concept of us actually making life easier for them, instead of just delivering a set of accounts."

The purpose of Kirkpatrick & Hopes, based in Reading, is to 'improve the lives of business-owner clients'. Marketing and sales training, human resource audits and

business development workshops are just some of the services it offers. Andrew Gray, the firm's Managing Director, says, "Our approach is to empower people to create a vision – to identify their primary aims. Defining what they want out of life is an essential prelude to the business-related issues.

"People today who start businesses in their 30s and 40s have a different outlook – they value their time much more; they want to enjoy their families and life outside work. So what we have to say really engages them." Woods believes many owner-managers are unconcerned with financial or administrative matters, and even marketing or management systems. "They don't want to get bogged down in all that when the reason they've gone into business in the first place is because there's something they're good at or are passionate about," he says. "We go for those opportunities – we can also pick up more mainstream accounts work but we target clients who need the extras."

aligning with clients

Networking has become a critical tool for businesses and individuals – but not all clients are receptive to their accountants telling them to get out more: "Some of our clients know they need that level of input from us – and they're great to work with; they see instantly what we're about," says Gray.

"Then there are those who need it but don't know it – and if we do our consultative selling correctly, they'll hopefully identify that need and sign up. But there are also clients who don't think they need it and can't be convinced. Many are from the days before we approached business this way, and they're more difficult. We want to deal with the first two groups."

Gareth Lynn, Director of KTS Owens Thomas, a medium-sized firm with 80 staff in south Wales, says, "I'm afraid there are some businesspeople who can't be told anything – they know it all. You just know they're likely to fail at some point. Everyone has to adapt – internet and communications technology makes it much more feasible for the little guy to compete with the big guys; no one's excluded from the game anymore. Our job is to help steer clients through – but with

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purpose and vision. It's a natural fit for accountants; we deal with so many businesses and see both good and bad practice."

Finding like-minded clients to deal with is best, according to Woods: "We tend to acquire clients earlier on in their business lifecycle themselves – people who are perhaps starting up or putting systems into place, and we tend to grow with them. We align with those businesses."

personal service, added value

Woods and his directors are highly proactive in seeking out new business. "We participate in networking organisations such as BNI, and meet people through the Chambers of Commerce and Federation of Small Businesses. They're brilliant vehicles for promoting our message."

Many small and medium firms increasingly rely on third parties not just to find new business but also to learn techniques that can increase yield from existing clients. Member organisations such as AVN provide a raft of tools to help firms add value to their service – growing their own revenues by helping their clients to grow theirs, or to save money.

This includes occasionally acting as personal coaches – something Woods acknowledges may initially appear at odds with convention: "People may not turn to their accountants for that kind of service – but that's only because accountants traditionally haven't provided it. Yet if you've built up a relationship, it's a lot easier for you and for them. Clients prefer to have everything under the one roof, rather than having to explain to someone new who also may not have much business acumen."

KTS Owens Thomas prides itself on having no respect for the boundaries of the profession – yet being an accounting firm works in its favour when stepping outside the

box: "We provide HR, IT, marketing and strategic planning services," says Lynn. "We can spring-board off our clients' trust because, as qualified accountants, we have rigid professional and ethical standards to uphold, whatever we do – and we take these standards into the other areas of business advice and support we provide."

people power

All three agree that having people on board for whom the added-value philosophy resonates is crucial for their firms to thrive.

"It's important to me to find people who naturally buy in," says Woods. "Taking on people who haven't spent long in other firms, doing things the traditional way, allows us to train them in our way of delivering client service."

Gray agrees: "It's vital that people don't just have the right technical skills but also share our attitude." To attract those people, Kirkpatrick & Hopes offers flexible and remote working options, as well as a profit-sharing bonus scheme and share scheme.

Staff also participate in 360-degree reviews and even monthly happiness feedback surveys. "It's important that we're consistent with what we advise our clients," says Gray. "And all that high-level HR stuff needn't be the preserve of large employers – you have to find ways to turn the tools that big companies use into something that's relevant for smaller businesses."

Providing structured development is a powerful weapon in the war for talent. "We have to maintain our position as an employer of choice," says Lynn, whose firm has gained ACCA Approved Employer Platinum accreditation. "Every business is chasing skill sets; so we have to provide a career path and an attractive package all-round, not just financially."

What all three practice directors share is a conviction that clients are open to modern ideas and the will to find ideas that work. As Woods concludes, "It's by using networking, marketing and business development tools that we can capitalise on all those cross-selling opportunities and keep building the firm." ■

Calum Robson is a freelance journalist