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Farming roots reap long-term rewards

OLIVIA MARAGNA CA HAS BUILT A SOLID REPUTATION AS A LEADER IN THE FINANCIAL PLANNING SECTOR, AND IT COMES FROM A FUNDAMENTAL APPRECIATION OF HARD WORK, WRITES ANTHONY O'BRIEN

Anyone with a farming background knows what hard work looks like, and Olivia Maragna CA, co-founder of Brisbane-based financial planning firm Aspire Retire Financial Services, is no exception.

Raised in rural Queensland, Maragna grew up lending a hand on the family property, cropping fruit, cane and raising cattle, which is a far cry from the winner's podium at the Association of Financial Advisers Awards.

Yet when Maragna took the gong for 2012 Financial Advisor of the Year, she added to an already impressive list of accolades that includes Queensland Telstra Young Business Woman of the Year, Queensland MYOB Small Business of the Year and the AFA Australian Female Excellence in Advice Award.

It's not a bad track record for a 35-year old. What makes Maragna's achievements all the more inspiring is that she was just 25 when she helped launch Aspire Retire.

Taking a different tack

Never content to run with the herd, Maragna says she and her business partner – husband Stephen Degiovanni – like to “do things a bit differently”. Shunning a commission-based business model, Aspire Retire operates on a fee-for-service basis. Maragna believes this

has been instrumental in her success. “Our focus is on strategy and structure,” Maragna explains. “We spend a lot of time listening to each client describe their goals and the outcomes they hope to achieve. It's only after our fourth meeting that we start to talk about investments and where clients may want to put their money. We believe we can add value for our clients in a lot of other areas, without focusing on this aspect.”

Clearly, it's an approach that has paid off. In the 10 years since its inception, Aspire Retire has enjoyed 30 per cent annual growth, and not even a global downturn could dampen the firm's robust expansion. “We have always grown more during the bad economic times,” says Maragna. “This is because it's when things get tough that good advice really stands out.”

Maragna believes the passion she has for each client's interests sets her business apart in a competitive market. She explains: “Each time we meet with a client they are treated as though they're the most important person we'll see that day. We are familiar with their lives, we know what type of tea or coffee they like when they come to see us, and we never recommend any investment or strategy to our clients that we wouldn't consider for ourselves, or recommend to our parents.”

With a client base that comprises a

large number of retirees and divorcees that makes sense, and Maragna adds, “Not everyone we see wants to amass great financial wealth. Some people just want to be able to spend more time with their grandchildren. It's all about working towards what our clients want.”

No room for compromise

After completing a business degree at QUT in Brisbane, Maragna honed her financial skills – and completed her professional year – with Deloitte's. She found herself continually drawn to the financial planning division of the practice, saying, “Accounting provides an excellent foundation but financial planning takes a very long-term view, and I find that very appealing.”

The ever-changing nature of financial planning may be a source of frustration for some, however it appeals to Maragna. “Change is the only constant in this industry” she notes. “For me, the dynamic nature of financial advice is very exciting.”

As a young Chartered Accountant, it would have been easy for Maragna to secure a financial planning role within a large financial institution. Instead, she chose the tougher path of starting her own business. This quite deliberate choice reflects Maragna's determination to be true to her personal style.



"Having my own licence means I'm not compromised in any way," she says. "I'm not aligned to a particular product suite, and by working on a fee-for-service basis, the advice we offer is completely unbiased and transparent. It's vital for me, personally, to be able to work in each client's best interest – and our independence lets me do this."

Inspired by family

While benefitting from some wonderful mentors in the accounting profession, Maragna says her greatest inspiration came from her parents. She describes growing up in a small business environment where each family member lent a hand on the farm. "I learned that being self-employed is hard work, though very rewarding, and I appreciated the value of building something that's all my own."

The long hours shared working with her family would stand Maragna in good stead when she opened the doors of Aspire Retire. She notes, "There's a great maxim that it takes a lifetime to become an overnight success, and for anyone hoping to achieve a work/life balance – especially in the early years – small business is not the solution."

Although the irony of coming from a family business and now sharing a venture with her husband isn't lost on Maragna, she says this didn't prevent long hours being the order of the day. "When we first started we were working phenomenal hours in, and on, the business and at times I wondered if it was all worth it," she recalls. "But you don't mind working hard when it's your own business – and no one wants to fail."

Hurdles

To be fair, the couple took a measured approach to ensure the success of the venture. They spent six months in the planning stage, taking steps that included minimising their personal debt. "We fool-proofed everything that could go wrong," she says.

Impressively, Aspire Retire's client base was built from the ground up. Without an existing client book, Maragna spent some time networking, however the business expanded largely by word of mouth, and still today, 97 per cent of Retire Aspire's new business comes by means of client referrals.

A self-confessed problem solver, Maragna says she had to be a jack-of-

all-trades in the early days. "We couldn't afford the wages needed to employ a large number of staff so I had to learn to do things myself. If I had an IT problem on the weekend for instance, I just had to learn how to fix it myself."

However, the greatest hurdle came from her own perception of being a young woman in what was then a male dominated industry. She says, "Being 25 and female I thought 'who is going to listen to me?'" What followed was an 18-month period investing in self-development and personal awareness. "I spoke with mentors, completed personal development courses, and just tried to soak up as much information as I could."

Today, Maragna is entirely confident in what she has to offer clients, and she has definite views on what 'success' means to her. "It's about getting people to refer you to their friends or family," she says. "Or having clients send me postcards when they're away because they know I care about them. And it's about seeing people's lives change for the better, based on the advice I have provided."

Aspire Retire has a number of CEOs of publicly listed companies on its client list but for Maragna, one of her most rewarding client experiences involves a retiree who was left a widow at age 60. Maragna explains, "When the lady's husband passed away, she was left floundering. After so many years of marriage she had no idea how to run her personal finances, and she came to us for help. That was 10 years ago, and these days not only is the lady confident and financially independent, she has become like a second mum to me."

Managing the global meltdown

The past five years have been undeniably testing for many in the financial advice industry but a client-centric approach has helped Maragna expand her customer base at a time when many of her competitors are struggling. She says: "When the GFC hit we immediately took a front foot approach, holding seminars, talking on the phone to clients even more than normal, and staying in touch constantly no matter whether we had good news or bad."

Being upfront about fees was also an advantage. Maragna verifies, "We quote upfront and charge a fixed fee so it's very transparent, and as we generally deal with directly held investments,



When a client tells you the advice you have provided has lifted a weight off their shoulders, you know you are doing your job well.



our clients didn't experience any of the liquidity problems associated with some managed investments."

As a fee for service practice, Maragna acknowledges her business won't be directly affected by the introduction of proposed standard APES 230 *Financial Planning Services*, which plans to address conflicted remuneration structures. Nonetheless she says, "I support any change that lets clients see professionals are working in the client's best interest."


Stay true to your target market

According to Maragna, the best piece of business advice she has received was to 'be clear on our target market and to stay true to it'. She says: "When we first started Aspire Retire, we were very fortunate to hit the ground running, and we only took on 'ideal' clients."

"We were very clear from the start that we were not after thousands of clients but rather a capped number of clients per adviser, that we know intimately," Maragna adds, "It was challenging to say 'no' to clients but it has paid off – we now have a good quality client base of large retainer clients who refer similar clients to us."

As for Maragna's tips for others considering following in her footsteps? "First and foremost," she says, "it's critical to stay on top of the game. That means continuing to learn at every stage and embracing opportunities for education and improvement"

It's a philosophy Maragna applies to her eight staff. She explains, "We have a board in the office that displays what we refer to as our CANEI list – it stands for 'Constant And Never-Ending Improvement'. We encourage staff to write suggestions on the list for how we can continue to stay ahead."

Maragna also believes it is vital to "keep it at the forefront of your mind that you're in a people business." She declares: "When a client tells you the advice you have provided has lifted a weight off their shoulders, you know you are doing your job well." 

APES 230: LATEST

The Institute will continue to keep members informed of any updates regarding the development of the Accounting Professional & Ethical Standards Board's proposed standard, APES 230 – *Financial Planning Services*. Updates will be added to the dedicated web page: charteredaccountants.com.au/apes230