

Innovation At Work

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What does innovation really mean in today's financial services sector? **Marjo Johne** profiles four productive industry professionals — Sheila Walkington, Vince Valenti, Roy Craik and Jason McIntyre — to gain perspective on how fresh thinking and new approaches can create breakthrough opportunities for advisors and, most importantly, their clients.

Financial advisors exist in a reality of perpetual challenges, with fluctuating markets, changing client demographics and an industry that's constantly re-organizing and restructuring. Fortunately, the world of finance and insurance also includes many savvy minds and intrepid spirits who answer challenges with innovative ideas and confront obstacles with a driving determination to make things better.

Whether this means coming up with a new way to help Canadians get a grip on their debt, creating products that let investors keep more of their money or addressing the unique needs of a particular population, these innovators keep the industry moving forward. And consumers today are better off because of them.

In these pages, we profile four innovators whose ideas and efforts have really made a difference. There are many other innovators in this industry, of course — too many, in fact, to mention here. But we think these four profiles are a good place to start.

Sheila Walkington

Money Coach, Money Matters

If Sheila Walkington ever had any doubts about her decision to give up her role as financial advisor to become one of Canada's first full-time money coaches, an unexpected phone call from radio broadcaster Sheila Rogers certainly put her mind to rest.

It was 2004 and Rogers, who was then host of the Vancouver-based CBC radio show Sounds like Canada, was looking to interview a money coach — an occupation so new back then that it was deemed a worthy topic for discussion on national radio. A mutual colleague put forward Walkington's name, but the wrinkle was that Walkington wasn't yet a money coach when Rogers called; she was still at Assante Wealth Management winding down her business as a successful financial advisor.

"I was actually planning to start my money coaching business in March but I got the call in February when I didn't even have my new business cards because I was too busy transitioning my clients at Assante," recalls Walkington. "It was great because I was already being interviewed as a money coach even before I had actually become a money coach. It was almost like a sign that, yes, I was doing the right thing."

Not that Walkington needed a sign. Having worked as a financial advisor for ten years, she saw first-hand the need for comprehensive money coaching. Many of her clients at Assante were overwhelmed by debt and some were struggling with the day-to-day management of their finances.

"My clients were coming to me for investment advice but they had no one to turn to for help in managing their money on a day-to-day basis or reducing their debt," says Walkington. "As a financial advisor, I was spending some time with my clients on cash flow and goal setting, but the problem is that financial planners are not compensated for this time and not all financial planners want to do this kind of service."

Today, Walkington's Vancouver-based money coaching business — which she aptly named Money Matters — is a thriving practice that serves about 20 clients a month. Unlike investment clients who generally remain active clients for years, Walkington's money coaching clients work with her for about four to five months, with the odd one coming back briefly to revisit financial goals.

The work is time-consuming, says Walkington.

“I spend 10 to 12 hours with my clients and that’s just working on cash flow,” she says. “Another key component of what I do is helping my clients deal with the psychology of money, helping them shed their negative attitudes and motivating them to get a grip and stop sabotaging their financial goals.”

It’s not always easy, says Walkington. Clients are often edgy when they first come to see her and some have told her they felt physically ill from the financial stress.

Coaching couples can also be particularly challenging since partners often have opposing views about money, says Walkington.

As a pioneer money coach, Walkington had no business model to follow so she conceived her own, coming up with service packages that range from \$1,200 for three meetings and coaching over four months and up to \$2,500 for four meetings over four or five months. The rates are higher for clients who are self-employed or have more complicated finances.

“It’s a big chunk of money, I know,” says Walkington, who also offers her services by phone. “But I’ve seen people spend \$1,000 or more a month than what they actually earn, so it’s really worth it because it helps them get back on track financially.”

To support her work, Walkington created tools that make it easier for clients to identify their spending patterns and needs. At the same time, she started offering tele-classes and developed workshops exclusively for women.

The demand for Money Matters’ services is now so high that Walkington decided to launch an associate program this month where she and a colleague will train aspiring money coaches.

“Basically we’ll be training them to become associate money coaches for Money Matters,” says Walkington. “We’re getting so much demand that we’re having trouble keeping up, so this way we can expand across Vancouver and even across the country.”

Money coaches and financial planners make perfect partners, says Walkington. In fact, some clients have found her through referrals from their financial planners. In turn, Walkington has referred a number of her clients to financial planners.

“Money coaches are a good complement to financial planners, so I get a lot of referrals from financial planners who may not have the skill set or the interest to do money coaching,” she says. “But in the end, it’s really the clients who benefit from this partnership because they’re getting the best of both worlds — investment advice and day-to-day money management.”

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