

Layoff led to Web site full of faaaabulousness

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Brooke Gibson works out of her home office, accompanied by her office cat Tank. Gibson was laid off from her job as a commercial real estate broker a year ago. Since then, she has founded an online magazine about women's issues, fashion and local fun.

Despite a crumbling commercial real estate market, Brooke Gibson was surprised when she was laid off from her job with a local developer about a year ago. She had closed some major deals and had more pending. Mentally, however, she was ready for change.

"I had always known, known deep down in my soul, it wasn't my calling," she said of working as a broker. "I could feel there was a lot more in me."

The next day, she says, she cracked a beer and sat down in her pajamas for some heavy thinking and assessment. She made three lists: One was of things she did well but didn't like. Another was of things she liked but wasn't necessarily good at. The last list, her most important, was of talents others said she was good at that she didn't necessarily realize.

One night, she woke up in a cold sweat, worried about what she was going to do with her life. The answer came about an hour later while she was reading an article in Entrepreneur magazine about an irreverent online site geared toward men offering recommendations on the newest, coolest stuff occurring in various cities. "That is what I want to do," she recalls thinking.

In May, she launched waxmama.com, an online magazine and daily e-mail service that seeks to connect Charlotte women with the hippest happenings in fashion, art, travel, beauty and pop culture. The name comes from a term Gibson and her friends use to describe a woman who evolves to make her life better. As the site says: "It's our job to keep you up to speed and faaaabulous!"

Four months after she started, she says, she has 500 loyal subscribers. In an interview with the Observer, Gibson, 32, talked about her plans for her online magazine and why she hasn't yet gone after advertisers.

Responses have been edited for clarity and length.

Q. From your list, what were some of the traits others saw in you that you didn't?

One was writing, which I never would have thought about. I didn't do well in formal writing or English classes. Another was good networking. I pay attention for putting two and two together and creating that stream to get things accomplished. Also, they said I had a good fashion sense, that I had a knack for creating amazing outfits out of random pieces. Those were the three things I heard over and over.

Q. What'd you do to get started, and how much did it cost?

I got the name, the logo and a Web designer. I have no mentor, no guidance, no one to ask questions to. Every bit of what I do has been trial and error, being up at 2 a.m. and trying to figure it out. It's really fun. There's no part I don't absolutely love.

I'm doing this with my savings. The initial Web set up was done by a friend. I've spent about \$3,000 to \$5,000 to get the Web site going. Plus there is promotional materials for the launch party. If I had money, I'd spend it on a public relations company and I would hire someone to help with advertising.

Q. It must be difficult in this economy to find advertisers. How's that going?

My honest strategy: I haven't tried yet. My business plan, based on interviews I listened to, is not to spend time finding advertising in the first six months. To instead create quality content, do the branding. My plan is I'm not going to spend time cold-calling advertisers. I'm going to spend time making connections, getting a proper Web site going, creating a small, dedicated following. Once I have things rolling, I'll reach out more for marketing help.

Q. Are there skills you used in commercial real estate that you find useful in Web publishing?

I can walk into a room by myself and feel comfortable. The one job requirement that is literally absolutely necessary in commercial real estate is the ability to network and strike up a conversation with a perfect stranger. In real estate, nine times out of 10, you walk into a room of 500 people you've never met and you're charged with making a deal. You've got to meet as many people as possible to find that deal nugget in there. But you must balance that with friendship - you're not going to make a deal if it's all business. You get to know people and then deals flow on their own.

Q. What's your vision for the future?

The hope is that the site would be a community of women. Eventually, the plan is to add a forum to discuss things. My ultimate goal is to expand it to other mid-sized cities and to get national sponsors.