

PREOCCUPATIONS

VERA KUZYK

You Scream, I Scream For a New Career

IN business school, owning my own business really was not on my radar.

I wasn't against it, but some people in B-school are totally focused on the idea: "I will own my own business at some point," they say. That wasn't me.

In the summer between business-school years, I met Minoos Taheri, and later we ended up in the same training class of the private banking division at JPMorgan. Within the first year, we started joking about owning a business together. Eventually, we both left and did other things, but we stayed friends. Last year, while Minoos was working in new media and I was doing wealth management at a boutique private bank, we got serious.

The long hours on Wall Street, plus the commute — I live in Montclair, N.J., with my husband and two small children — had really worn me down. The lack of flexibility in my schedule was just not working for me. Going into business with a partner and having more control over my work life felt like the right change.

Both of us being business school graduates, we wanted to minimize risk, so we looked to buy an existing business instead of starting our own. We used an online service that led us to a pair of Häagen-Dazs shops in Manhattan that were up for sale.

We hadn't ever considered ice cream franchises, but as we did our due diligence, we discovered that Häagen-Dazs was solid and stable and had some good support for its franchisees. We didn't know anything about ice cream — other than that we liked it. We knew we would have a lot to learn, but what made me more comfortable about taking this plunge is that these shops had both been in business and successful for at least 25 years.

Still, leaving my job a year ago was extremely frightening. The question of income loomed large. We did all kinds of calculations. What are the profit margins? What cost efficiencies can we deliver? Can we streamline the business?

There were a lot of spreadsheets. I

laugh now because this has finally given us a chance to apply all those things we learned in business school but never got to use.

Before we could complete the purchase, I attended Häagen-Dazs University in Minnesota. And then my life changed.

I remember the first day I walked into one of the shops, and both the employees and I knew that they knew far more about the business than I did — they had already been working there. That provided motivation to get up to speed fast. They were used to an absentee owner, but this was not an investment. This was very much a new career for me.

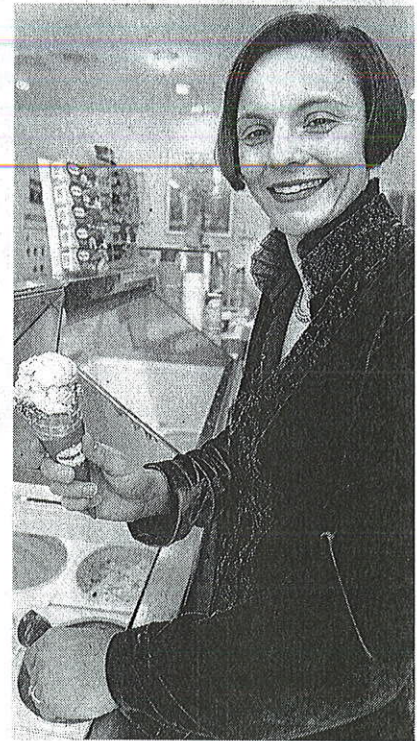
I am at the stores at least five days every week. I've taken an active role in employee management, and though that has been challenging I'm enjoying mentoring my shop managers, and I try to take cues from them. I introduce my ideas delicately and know that sometimes they'll be rebuffed. I respect my employees' habits and recommendations, too.

One thing I'm absolutely committed to is great customer service. If you're not focused on it you won't succeed in this type of business. Especially in a recession, I'm shocked by the number of service providers who don't pay more attention to customers.

Looking back now, I can see that I got out of Wall Street at a great time. Even though I work more now, I'm in charge of how I manage my time. I know that if I'm working in my home office at 1 a.m. it's just as valuable as if I'm sitting in an office at 4:30 p.m., but that's not a choice I had as an employee. Also, I find that I'm much more productive because I work when I need to work and I still have time to do stuff with my kids.

When my son told his preschool teacher that his mom owns an ice cream shop, she didn't believe him. Later, she asked me to make an ice cream presentation at the school, and I am thrilled that I can now do that sort of thing.

We still have a nanny who works the same number of hours, but we adjusted them a little. She comes in late one morning so I can take my daughter to



MARILYNN K. YEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

As co-owner of two Häagen-Dazs franchises, Vera Kuzyk says that she has more control over her work life.

an early swim class — and not have to drag this poor child to a class at 7:30 at night when she's tired.

Our nanny has been fabulous, and so has my husband. We rely on his income more, but he also gets more time with the kids. I often work on weekends, which really forces the issue of daddy time, and I think that's great. Certainly the transition has been stressful, but he's been incredibly supportive.

Recently, Minoos also left her corporate job and is now much more involved in our daily operations, where at first she was doing mostly big-picture, behind-the-scenes work. We can now channel more energy into planning. That might involve buying a couple of more stores because any marketing we do is very easily transferable to multiple sites. But we don't want to become too big. We're looking at more business-to-business sales and catering as possible places for expansion, too.

IT'S been a year, and I have never looked back. I don't miss Wall Street at all. Once a week I bring home ice cream for my children — they are big mango sorbet fans. The kids' absolute glee about the new career is fun, too.

Going from Wall Street to a very different business sector could have been a disaster if I'd jumped into a complicated, difficult business model. But, at the end of the day, it's a very simple business model. It's ice cream. □