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Karen Chung, Serial Entrepreneur, on Bringing Autism Services into the 21st Century

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31 July 2012 by Beth Pitts

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Karen Chung is a serial entrepreneur and investor with active involvement in several businesses over the past 15 years in diverse industries including executive search, investment banking, real estate development

and high-end retail.

Karen founded and served as CEO of Nomadic Diversity Solutions, a niche retained executive search firm specializing in placing women and minority executives for clients including Microsoft, Chase, Boeing, Nortel, and Ernst & Young, among others.

Through another of her ventures, Nomadic Capital, a boutique investment banking firm, she has worked with numerous middle market companies to help structure and raise debt and equity capital to fund expansion and growth. Her banking expertise spans many industries with a particular expertise in real estate financing.

In 2010, she founded [Special Learning, Inc.](#) a global leader for autism and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) solutions leveraging technology as educational resources. Through its comprehensive information and resource portal, Special Learning provides the global autism community with a broad range of valuable resources and web-based and downloadable tools, including mobile apps, ABA training and education products, and professional services designed to empower parents, teachers and providers so that they can help individuals with autism move up the skills spectrum intuitively, successfully and affordably. Special Learning's mission is to provide every person diagnosed with autism the skills they need to attain an abundant and fulfilling life.

A native of South Korea, her family immigrated to the United States in 1975 Chicago. She is an active member of the Kellogg Graduate School of

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beth Pitts

Our previous Global Editor has remained with The NextWomen to head up the Business Advice Programme, which she set up and now leads.

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We spoke to Karen about how she is applying cutting edge technology to the autism services arena; the advantages of her diverse workforce; and her international expansion and exit plans.

TNW: How did you come up with the idea for Special Learning, Inc. and then arrive at the decision to turn your idea into a reality?

KC: When I first became aware of the opportunity to establish a business in the field of autism, I decided to start a web-based business that sold quality educational products to support the education and learning of children with autism. The competitive market condition was more attractive than the general market because this market is not as competitive and hence less prone to price competition.



After about one year into execution of Special Learning, I met my partner, Michele LaMarche, who has 15 years of experience as a certified behavior analyst and is a founder of a Step By Step Academy (SBSA), a very successful autism treatment facility in Columbus, OH.

As she educated me on this needs of this market, it was very clear that we had an opportunity to merge our skills and experiences to create a business that can make a significant impact in this community by leveraging the knowledge and expertise of the Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) treatment methods of SBSA with technology, product development and sales and marketing expertise of Special Learning.

Note: Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is the only scientifically validated intervention method proven to be highly effective with children with autism. When applied in an intensive setting (40-hours per week), results have demonstrated that 47% of children can be mainstreamed into the regular school system.

TNW: What makes your company different from your competitors?

KC: Our holistic and integrated approach is a significant differentiating factor.

The scope of our business, both in terms of geographic reach and breadth of our offerings is different from what is offered by others.

Autism is still a cottage industry, with many companies started and operated by parents of children with autism who are looking for services for their own child and have not been able to find what they need.

Special Learning takes a solutions approach in serving the needs of the autism community. We do this by delivering a broad array of information, products and services all designed to work together and in conjunction with each other to achieve the greatest success. With our partnership with SBSA, we are able to expand our offering to include physical ABA therapies in conjunction with our technology, physical and e-Products.

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Our company is also different in that we offer products to meet the needs of the individuals with autism across the entire age spectrum from children, adolescents/young adults and adults. This business approach is very different as most businesses only provide products or services for a single age category, typically children.

We are also selectively expanding into international markets by not only selling products and services, but also establishing partnerships with educational facilities in order to bring our ABA programming to those countries with significant needs.

TNW: What is your business model?

KC: We generate revenues from single unit or bulk sales of our products and services. We also generate revenues through our monthly subscription services to generate recurring revenues.

TNW: When you built your team, what are the key qualities you looked for to ensure the success of your business?

KC: We look for highly smart, dedicated, experienced individuals with a commitment and ability to generate exceptional results. Even as a relatively young company, we recognize and encourage excellence by frequent payout of periodic bonus and compensation adjustments.

Our culture is highly collaborative, fast paced and has a strong focus on delivery and accountability, which makes it a bit challenging to add new full-time team members.

TNW: Who were your first customers and how hard was it to attract them?

KC: Our first customers were clinicians and parents. As a web-based company, we devote a significant amount of time and resources to creating brand awareness as a means of driving sales. We are seeing the fruits of our efforts as more and more people are turning to us as expert resources in seeking help and recommendation, in addition to purchasing our products.

TNW: Who are your customers and partners now?

KC: Our customer base includes parents, professionals and school districts. Our partners are highly recognized leaders in the industry like Dr. James Partington and Dr. Luc Lecavalier. We also have a very close partnership with Step By Step Academy. We are in the process of developing a relationship with a group of Montessori schools in the Philippines to bring ABA programming to serve the needs of their special needs students.

TNW: What is your marketing strategy and what has been the most effective source of new customers so far?

KC: We employ an integrated marketing strategy that includes both online and offline marketing tactics. We also have a direct sales organization that includes an outbound sales organization. We are beginning to build a network of outside sales consultants to identify and close larger opportunities with school districts.

Since we employ an integrated marketing strategy, it is difficult to specify exactly the primary source of customers since all activities work in conjunction with each other. Our tactics include: SEO, social media, email marketing, national print ads, blogging, outbound sales, business development, press releases and public relations.

TNW: What is next for your company?

KC: The focus of our business since inception has been on developing a highly credible web resource portal for parents, providers and educators. The free Resource Library in our site contains hundreds of valuable content,

including original articles, professional blogs, training videos, and downloadable tools. Our site also contains national directories of various resources for the autism community.

In addition to always adding to our Resource Library, we have been focusing on our product development efforts. In addition to continuing to expand our product portfolio, we are expanding our geographic reach into select international markets so that we can fulfill our mission of bringing ABA treatments to those in need with limited or no access to this valuable therapy.

TNW: What are the advantages of gender diversity in a startup? Are there any disadvantages?

KC: Our company is a strong believer in diversity, whether it be gender, cultural, race or geographic. Our workforce is global with people located in the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Madedonia, Eastern Europe, Canada and the U.S.

The level of diversity in our organization contributes significantly to our outlook and affects every aspect of our business from marketing to product development, among others.

Our global workforce diversity strategy allows us to recruit the best talent regardless of geographic boundaries. It is also beneficial in that we develop a sense of openness in terms of how to we look at the world as we are able to develop a personal relationship with countries in which our co-workers reside (or are from).

TNW: Do you have any tips or any advice for women who are thinking about becoming entrepreneurs?

Entrepreneurship is a gender-neutral endeavor. Every person with a sound business plan and ability to execute should go for it!

However, women, especially those with children, face additional challenges in being able to manage the work-life balance. It is very important that if there is a spouse or significant other involved that they discuss balancing out responsibilities and setting realistic expectations for what can and cannot be accomplished in a day or a week.

For all entrepreneurs, expect that a business venture will take three times longer to achieve success and as much if not more in resources (in dollars). With 80 percent failure rate in startups its easy to give up when one experiences a rough patch but those seemingly negative experiences are what provides the strength and experience necessary for success.

TNW: What is your top tip for balancing motherhood with a career?

KC: Being able to quit long enough to feed my family and spend quality time with them before heading back on email. It is also important to carve out some independent downtime and to allow yourself to leave some items on the to-do list incomplete without strong feelings of guilt.

TNW: Do you lie awake at night sometimes thinking about the company? What aspects of it specifically keep you awake?

KC: All the time. At first it was about how to make payroll. As that issue went away, it was about how to increase sales and to expand both in terms of products and markets.

TNW: Do you have any pet projects as an entrepreneur?

KC: I dont have any time.

TNW: If you hadn't chosen entrepreneurship, what alternative career path might you have pursued?

KC: Corporate finance or strategy consulting.

TNW: What has been your biggest challenge throughout the history of your company, from planning to funding and execution, and how could others learn from it?

The two biggest challenges have been funding and finding the right people to grow with me.

TNW: Do you have plans to expand internationally? Which countries and when?

KC: Yes. Philippines, China and India. Philippines 2012. China and India - 2013.

TNW: Do you envision an exit, how and when?

KC: Yes. We will be seeking venture capital financing to grow our business exponentially. We will be seeking an exit five to seven years from the capital infusion.

TNW: When did you first think about selling Special Learning, Inc?

KC: Always. My background is in corporate strategy and finance. With that background, there is knowledge that companies are built to create enterprise value and a way to unlock that enterprise value is to find a way to liquidate all or portions of the business.

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