

# Maverick's 'small is beautiful' philosophy

By Chris Daniels

Julie Rusciolelli considers her professional reawakening to be similar to the experience of Tom Cruise's character in the film *Jerry Maguire*. Until last May, Rusciolelli was pulling in what she calls a fat six-figure salary as the technology vice-president at Cohn & Wolfe, a large Toronto-based PR firm. But after six years, she says her job became all about bringing in billable hours rather than a passion for the client. "I was a lieutenant. They told me, 'Julie, go attack. Go get business. Right, here I go,' " she recalls. "I was on autopilot."

Rusciolelli, 36, explains why she left Cohn & Wolfe while lunching at Via Veneto, located just across from her new office sandwiched in "PR Valley" on Toronto's Bloor Street between Cohn & Wolfe and the other big gun, Hill & Knowlton. She now runs her own firm, Maverick Public Relations, which is one of the fastest-growing PR firms in Canada. In the seven months since its humble beginnings out of Rusciolelli's basement, Maverick has landed 20 clients, including Excite Canada, Royal Mutual Funds and 724 Solutions. And after four months, Maverick began turning a profit, though Rusciolelli refuses to disclose specific financial figures.



## Julie Rusciolelli: no longer on autopilot

What impresses client Chris Monette, general manager of software company Symantec Corp. of Toronto, is that unlike the four other PR firms he's hired in the past, "Maverick acts as a partner...as opposed to going, 'Well, I don't know if I can do this when I don't have enough billable hours.' With Maverick, I tell them how much I can spend for the quarter and they execute." Symantec's former PR agency was Cohn & Wolfe.

Paul Romanchuk, chair of [NorstarMall.ca](http://NorstarMall.ca), agrees. He says when looking for a PR firm, he met with top PR executives who didn't even bother to find out what his company did. "Based on Maverick's interest and enthusiasm, they jumped right to the front of the group," he says.

Indeed, it is enthusiasm that clients credit as Maverick's strength. Rusciolelli says this enthusiasm comes from modeling Maverick after an information technology company. She says employees come first, clients second. In fact, Maverick will turn down clients because Rusciolelli either believes their money is better spent in other marketing disciplines or, as in the case of two casino operators that recently sought her services, the ethics of the product or company conflict with her own. And Maverick's 10-person staff enjoy such perks as birthdays off, an office golf green and the promise of a four-day retreat in Mexico should Maverick meet its spring target.

"Incredible service is the byproduct of a staff that feels empowered and happy. But the (others) haven't figured it out. I know. I was part of that regimen," says Rusciollelli. She explains that at some firms staff are stressed out and have to deal with petty management directives, such as one company's decree that only one employee should go for a coffee run, not three.

But it isn't all roses for Rusciollelli. She is facing a civil suit from Cohn & Wolfe. Although Cohn & Wolfe's general manager, Carol Panasiuk, won't talk about the details of the suit, Rusciollelli says it stems from an exit contract she signed when leaving Cohn & Wolfe in which she promised not to solicit Cohn & Wolfe clients for a period of six months.

Rusciollelli says she disagrees with Cohn & Wolfe's interpretation of the agreement. Rusciollelli admits she took on former Cohn & Wolfe clients within that six-month period, but in every case she says the clients sought her out, not the other way around. "(The contract) doesn't say 'non-compete.' It doesn't say 'Should a client come and find you out, you can't take them,' " she says.

Symantec's Monette knows Rusciollelli has shaken up the industry, but says Maverick could become so successful that it could potentially evolve into what it claims it won't be: another big, bureaucratic PR firm. "What happens—and I'm sure Julie at some point will be faced with this—as you get more successful, you forget what got you there," he says. "You think it's all about you, not the client."