

Days of Wine and Business

Running a wine advising and consulting business gives this MBA the freedom to learn all she can about her chosen field



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I'm the founder and principal of Your Personal Sommelier, a wine-consulting company which offers personalized wine services to individuals and businesses in San Francisco and Los Angeles. These services include wine tastings, cellar management, and personal wine shopping. In an effort to target the growing number of young, urban wine drinkers, I recently founded HIP TASTES Events, a special-events firm through which I offer stylish wine tastings to the general public in San Francisco.

As sole proprietor, my current job responsibilities encompass everything from sourcing new business and forging partnerships to servicing client needs and overseeing marketing and advertising. I'm my own IT staff, marketing guru, accounting staff, and operations manager.

GRAPE ADVENTURES. The second year of business school at the [UCLA Anderson School of Management](#) was a great opportunity for me to immerse myself in the study of wine on the weekends and take an intensive six-month-long sommelier certification course (see BW Online, 2/15/06, "[A Vintage Crop of MBAs](#)"). I was president of the Anderson Wine Club and had already taken some preliminary courses with the International Sommelier Guild, a wine-education organization.

I passed the rigorous sommelier exam and officially launched Your Personal Sommelier in September, 2005, and HIP TASTES Events in January, 2006. Eight months into it all, I'm still having a blast. I really enjoy working with corporate and individual clients, many of whom are working professionals interested in learning more about wine in the comfort of their own homes. Between visiting clients in their homes or offices to talk about wine, hosting events for adventurous wine drinkers, and writing about it, I'm rarely far from a good glass of Pinot Noir.

Every workday is different, but here is a snapshot of a typical one:

9:00 a.m. -- I usually wake up around 9:00 a.m., a little later than most folks, but since I often work until midnight and don't have a commute, I allow myself the luxury of an extra hour of sleep. It's one of the perks of running my own business and working from

home.

9:30 a.m. -- By now, I've checked all my e-mail and decided if it's prudent to stop for breakfast. E-mails come in from current and prospective clients as well as wine-trade-related entities -- which send updates on the wine press, invitations to attend culinary and wine events, and business inquiries. If I'm lucky, I snag a few moments for some fruit and an omelet.

9:35 a.m. -- If I'm hosting a tasting in the evening, I'll often pause to taste the wine at this hour because the palate is most fresh in the morning. Coffee and breakfast always come after wine, strange as that may sound. The bitterness of coffee wreaks havoc on your ability to taste the subtle aromas and flavors in wine.

10:30 a.m. -- I'm in the thick of things, and the mid-morning can bring anything from a client call to discuss the wines for an upcoming private or corporate event to an Internet search for a venue for my next HIP TASTES event.

12:00 p.m. -- I'm still cranking at my desk, often taking care of logistical matters (IT troubleshooting, marketing e-mails, etc.). During this time, I may also prepare a proposal for a prospective client who's interested in hiring me for an upcoming event.

1:30 p.m. -- By now I'm blogging on the latest phenomenon in the wine world, putting what I hope to be a youthful and hip edge on a usually staid field. Because so much of what I do hinges on my reputation as an "expert" in the field of wine, I've found that writing is a terrific avenue for building this image. Today, I might be profiling a new "Hip Taster of the Week," someone in my acquaintance who brings a new spin to the wine-enthusiast mold.

3:00 p.m. -- Mid-afternoon may find me at a wine tasting, like the one I attended recently in downtown San Francisco featuring wines from the Rhône and Alsace regions of France and open exclusively to members of the trade. Too good to be true? Several hours later, I leave with a few gift bottles, a bunch of pictures for my blog, and some new contacts (see BW Online, 12/15/05, "[Networking for the Right Reasons](#)").

6:00 p.m. -- Back home, I eat a snack in front of the computer while catching up on e-mails from the afternoon. I really love working in the evening because the phone finally stops ringing and e-mail slows to a trickle.

8:00 p.m. -- I almost always stop for a nice dinner and a glass of wine in the evening. I'll often make a big salad using whatever's handy in the kitchen. Salads are one of my favorite foods but are really tricky to pair with wine, so I often reach for a crisp New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, as the wine's crisp acidity stands up well to greens and vegetables.

9:00 p.m. -- Late night is when the creative juices really flow for me, so I often use the



time after dinner and before midnight to work on my bi-weekly wine column.

12:00 a.m. -- A good day's work behind me, I curl up with a great book. Then, it's all about my nine hours.

I didn't anticipate the grit I'd need to cope with some of the setbacks and challenges that inevitably accompany starting a new business. When I was just getting started, I had my laptop freeze, my Internet go down, and several other major crises occur in the same week. I thank my lucky stars that's behind me. I've always sought out challenges and enjoyed competition, so being an entrepreneur is perfect for me.

A GOOD ACCOUNTANT. The experiences I had at business school are absolutely helping me to keep my job because they gave me the skills to understand my brand positioning, negotiations, the value of calculated risk, and the need for capital expenditures. The most important thing they have given me, however, is confidence. I really feel that I'm capable of making this company a success, and I'm excited each and every day to wake up and continue that journey.

But if I were to go back to business school now, I would take business law and entrepreneurial finance. That said, there are some things about starting your business, like finding all the possible tax deductions, that B-school simply can't prepare you for. Even though I took taxation at Anderson, my accountant is indispensable.

To land a job working with me, you have to have a really strong passion for wine and fulfill a role I desperately need to address. It's a bit of a tough sell right now, since I'm a one-woman shop, but the door's open. How did I do it? I took a deep breath and jumped right in -- and I've never been happier.

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