

STEP 1 FOCUS ON FULFILLING A NEED

Start with something you are passionate about, and know that your business success isn't limited by your education or experience. Desire, willpower and research go a long way.

Downsized twice after 30 years in corporate America,

Adrienne Simpson had been unemployed and clinically depressed for a year when she decided to launch Smooth Mooove Senior Relocation Services, Inc. (wemove seniors.com), out of her home in October 2002. Simpson got the idea after moving her mother from Georgia to Michigan. "My plan was to put everything in a truck and send her on her way," she recalls. But her mom walked Simpson through her home and said, "Here's what's going to happen. I'm selling this, keeping that, and I am giving this away."

A certified trucker, Simpson initially planned to run her business as a packing service for senior citizens. But once she realized seniors' needs, she shifted gears. With revenues of \$400,000, her Stone Mountain, Georgia-based firm specializes in relocating seniors, providing value-added services such as antiques appraisal, estate sales and transport of clients and their pets.

The number of businesses owned by African-American women in the United States grew by 147 percent between 1997 and 2006.

—Source: Center for Women's Business Research

STEP 2 TACKLE THE PROPOSAL

A weekend visit to Las Vegas, Nevada, in April 2006 changed Vani Kumar's life. Not a big-time gambler, she turned 40 bucks into more than a quarter million dollars at the slot machines.

Kumar decided to use her winnings to open The Suit Closet (thesuitcloset.com), a Los Angeles boutique housing more than 1,000 brand-name women's suits.

She didn't go into the retail business by chance. While studying apparel manufacturing and management at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising (FIDM), Kumar had worked on a business plan for the company. And since graduating in June 2005 she had been shopping around for bank financing. But it wasn't until she became a jackpot winner, hitting \$286,656 in Vegas, that she had the necessary seed capital. "The ironic thing is that after taxes, it ended up being just \$200 off what I had projected in my business plan," says Kumar, whose plan also calls for expanding outlets nationwide within the next five years and adding footwear and accessories to the mix. "It was like divine intervention."

Now the 26-year-old entrepreneur is offering women, from high school graduates to corporate execs, something that men have always had—convenient choices in their work wardrobes. Kumar likens the business model for The Suit Closet to the national apparel chain Men's Wearhouse. ▶

HOW TO GET STARTED:

Test your idea.

Try surveys and focus groups. You can send an e-mail survey and create your own report using Zoomerang.com, Vovici.com and Advancedsurvey.com.

Consider reaching out to local business schools where students can test your business model. Or try hiring an independent marketing research firm. Such consultants cost \$75 to \$150 an hour and can assist you in designing a survey or organizing a focus group. Read the *Focus Group Guidebook* by David L. Morgan (Sage Publications), which is a guide to creating a customized focus group study. And visit the Marketing Research Association (mra-net.org) and the American Marketing Association (ama.org).

Find your niche market.

Click on Sappbiz.com for a checklist to help with compiling industry data. Check out similar businesses at trade shows, conventions or local business association meetings. Seek out counselors and talk to industry veterans through organizations like SCORE "Counselors to America's Small Business" (score.org; 800-634-0245).

A solid proposal will open doors.



HOW TO WORK YOUR PLAN:

Drill down on the details.

When working on your business plan, be prepared to answer detailed questions about the following:

- The type of business you are in
- Why the market and timing are right for your product or service
- Your target audience
- The location of your business
- The plan to distribute, price, brand and promote the business
- Start-up capital requirements

Ask the experts.

For help developing your business plan, visit your local small business development centers, many of which are affiliated with local colleges or chambers of commerce. The best place to start is with the Association of Small Business Development Centers (asbdc-us.org; 703-764-9850) or the U.S. Small Business Administration (sba.gov; 800-827-5722).