

CRAIN'S

NEW YORK BUSINESS

VOL. XXIII, NO. 25 WWW.NEWYORKBUSINESS.COM

JUNE 18-24, 2007 PRICE: \$3.00

Small Business

Acting school stages rebirth as a trainer of executives

Performance

of a Lifetime offers

live-action problem-solving, wins clients

BY SHARON CLEARY

ELEVEN YEARS AGO, PERFORMANCE OF A Lifetime got off to a fast start in a sprawling SoHo loft. The school offered a mix of classes in acting, singing, poetry and improvisation, which were fun, interesting and well-attended. They just weren't bringing in enough income to cover POAL's overhead.

Instead of closing the place down, in 1997 founders Cathy Salit and David Nackman took a chance. At the suggestion of several of their students, the duo took their skills on the road. They began offering courses using role-playing, acting and improvisation to help local companies train their staff in everything from public speaking to team building.

Today, the company boasts 25 active clients — including several large banks and corporations — seven full-time staffers and 66 part-time instructors. With classes customized to the client's needs and costing as much as \$25,000 for a one-day session, POAL brought in revenues of nearly \$2 million last year — up 25% from 2005.

Two years ago, in one of its largest projects to date, POAL began working with Booz Allen Hamilton's New York office. The project was designed to help the consulting firm's senior

partners, most of whom are men, become better mentors to less-senior women partners.

Learning to help others

"WE ARE IN A HYPERCOMPETITIVE SECTOR with long hours, lots of travel, and that has all sorts of consequences for women's work-life balance," says Ann Bohara, a senior manager for diversity and inclusion at Booz Allen. "We want mentors to learn how to help someone whose experience at the firm may not be like theirs."

To help them do just that, Mr. Nackman and Ms. Salit spent almost five months writing sketches that illustrated potential misunderstandings between Booz Allen mentors and staffers. To make the scripts believable, they interviewed partners to get a feel for consultants' language. The duo also prepared background stories for each character and kept a running list of business acronyms. Booz Allen partners then acted out the parts in front of an audience of their peers.

The classes were so successful that POAL was asked to craft similar sketches for the consultant's London and Washington, D.C., partners. To date, nearly half of Booz Allen's partners around the world have attended the program.

"People know what they're supposed to do in a given situation, but they don't do it," says Ms. Bohara. "POAL is a way to learn by doing."

Over the years, POAL itself has had to do a lot of learning. The first hurdle in making the transition to corporate trainer was gearing classes not simply to a business clientele but to

a new purpose. It all began with a sales call.

"I asked potential clients if I could speak to their bosses and arranged meetings," says Ms. Salit, who has a background in education and performance, and whose partner has a background in theater. At those meetings, she explained that many companies used role-playing to help solve problems and offered to create programs geared to their needs.

By 2000, POAL had garnered 10 clients, mostly young dot-coms open to new approaches to learning. When the dot-com bubble burst the following year, the bulk of POAL's customers vanished, and the company had to lay off all seven staffers. Using a successful project for Thomson Financial as a toehold, the duo began pitching theater workshops to a mainstream corporate audience.

Taking another chance

BUT GRASPING THE CULTURE AND vocabulary of old-line customers proved to be difficult. To bridge that gap, the founders took another major chance and hired Maureen Kelly, an amateur performer with 15 years' experience working with Fortune 500 companies as a management consultant. POAL had worked with her briefly in 2000, but rehired her in 2003 as the company's business translator.

"She would sit in on conference calls and repeat what our client was saying in words that we could understand," says Mr. Nackman.

With the lines of communication open, POAL cracked the corporate market, impressing clients with how much time the company was willing to spend learning their business and then crafting specific sketches that allow even the most senior managers to learn by doing.

"Telling someone to stop talking and start listening does not work," says Lisa Vertucci, managing director of talent management at Lehman Brothers, a client since 2005. "By participating in a role-playing exercise, the individual is able to identify areas in need of development firsthand, which is much more effective."

AT A GLANCE

PERFORMANCE OF A LIFETIME

BIGGEST PROJECT Ran a series of sessions around the world for top executives of large accounting firm

TAB \$500,000

SMALLEST PROJECT Ran individual presentation-coaching program for trial attorney

TAB \$400

PERFORMANCE OF A LIFETIME

Melea Seward, marketing director
212.343.2884 x 310

mseward@performanceofalifetime.com
www.performanceofalifetime.com