

In the spotlight: Anne Graham



Anne Graham of McPhail HLG Financial Planning in Victoria was recently announced the 2011 Securitor National Adviser of the Year. In 2009, she won the Money Management Financial Planner of the Year award and previous to that she qualified for the AFR Smart Investors Masterclass Top 50 in 2007, 2008 and 2009.

In a country that has an estimated 18,000¹ financial planners this is an outstanding result. Here we talk to Anne to see if we can glean some secrets to her success.

Anne, congratulations on your most recent award. How important is it for you to be recognised by your peers?

You get an absolute buzz to win an award and it's really great to win the Securitor award because I know the quality of the group. Previous awards have been based on submissions by myself and then interviews, etc. In this instance, I wasn't involved at all so not only was it a real surprise, it felt special. Winning awards is not my day-to-day focus but to win third-party endorsement for what I do day-to-day means that I know I'm on track.

What attracted you to financial planning when you moved from the banking sector to planning in 1999?

I love it. What started me on the path was I'd done some accounting while working in banking many years ago. When I was at home with my first child, I wanted to ensure my professional abilities would make me employable when I was ready to return to work. I undertook the CPA course, which included financial planning. The combination of technical ability, and problem solving and relating it to a real person was a combination I really liked. I like talking and dealing with people and listening. So I did DFP8 and that was it.

What kind of business do you run? Who are your typical clients?

We started with a partnership in an accounting firm in Box Hill, Melbourne. Our clients were initially pre and post retiree clients referred from the business who were generally small business owners. We're now seeing more professionals and quite a number of expats also. We are also seeing second and third generation clients. We help the younger clients with their budgets and risk, while for the older clients it's a mix of everything. The younger clients generally come in more focused with a real purpose. For example, "we've outgrown our house, can we afford to keep it as an investment?" It's a little like consulting work but we recognise the gaps in the investment side, or maybe risk or estate planning, or even the need to consolidate super.

¹ Treasury Press Release No. 018, The HON Bill Shorten MP, November 2010

Regulatory change has been a part of financial planning since you've been in the industry, what kind of impacts have they had on you personally and the businesses you've been in? What are your biggest concerns now and challenges as a planner?

One of the greatest concerns is whether those who need advice can obtain it cost-effectively. I'd like to be able to sit for an hour and say I can do this for you and then you can come back later, for a fixed fee. However, it's not always practicable in this regulatory environment.

What are the greatest rewards?

What I love is dealing with the clients - hearing their dreams and goals and being able to help them reach them and help allay their anxieties. Some people are not going to get there but they also need to be told – and while that's a difficult conversation it's good for them to know they will need to change the path they're currently on.

What advice would you give new advisers to the industry – what kind of career do you think they are entering?

It's an exciting profession, and there's so many arms to it, if you come in highly technically proficient you can focus on that, if you are an investment specialist you can focus there and if you are more relationship focused you can play to those strengths. You need to be good technically but you have many areas of expertise to focus on. You should also focus on planning as a profession and attend PD days and talk to other planners, you need to be able to see where you want to be in your profession in five years' time and work towards it. Ask questions of peers (other planners in the group), be willing to take advice and try new ideas; use the resources offered by the Securitor group, particularly the PDMs; be involved in the industry; find a mentor and stay positive.

What do you think is the secret to your success?

We treat clients like people, not numbers or fees. We're responsive to their needs. We also think it's important to make sure we're getting good people to work with us. If you do all that, everything else follows. I do a lot of PD and involve myself in the dealer group activities – such as Securitor Circle and NAC and other initiatives. I'm also an early adopter of new ideas such as the Pricing Advice pilot, diversification of income in the business, practicing the intergenerational advice theory. I also have solid business growth and a strong compliance record.

On winning the Money Management awards the judges said they were impressed with our client-centred business with strong, well-planned client service offering, a track record in various other awards and continuous updating of knowledge so that strategies provided are competent and appropriate for clients.

Do you think that being a woman has had an effect on your business?

I don't know. You see things the way you see things. I didn't see it as a disadvantage. It's a point of difference. We've attracted clients because of that, but we may not have attracted clients because of that as well. The number of female advisers/support staff that congratulated at me at the conference, after the announcement, was quite surprising. I didn't know a lot of these people but they were happy for me and felt it was great that a woman won – they were very proud and genuinely thrilled and some thought of me as a role model.