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## ● PROFILE: LIVE WIRE



by Carla Danziger

Spend a few minutes with Chryssa Zizos, the petite, 30-year-old founder and president of Live Wire Media Relations in historic Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, and you will sense her vibrancy and that of the business she started just three and a half years ago.



Chryssa Zizos

Zizos' energy and enthusiasm are contagious as she takes a visitor on a tour of the modern office suite and its piece de résistance — a state-of-the-art simulated TV studio. Media training is just one aspect of the business, she explains, but one of the most popular. The studio is where she runs a media "boot camp" for executives bound for television interviews on the networks or affiliates. Another part of the training includes mock interviews with reporters from major newspapers.

After the tour, seated at a table in her bright corner office, she talks about "perception management."

"Companies are constantly challenged to ensure that the public's perception of them reflects the truth in the most positive light," she says. "Think of the power the media has to shape that perception. We're in the 'perception management business' because

I never wanted to be tempted to do something else. Too often, companies that are successful at one thing, think they can be at another, and it takes away from the quality of what they were doing originally."

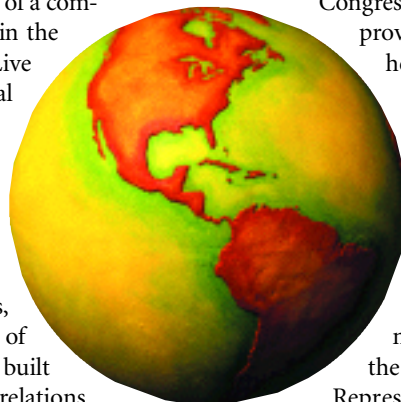
She speaks as the head of a company that is very much in the black: She financed Live Wire with its own capital and with cash. Within three years the company accumulated a list of clients ranging from global technology companies to major newspapers and area restaurants, and registered earnings of \$2 million. How Zizos built this powerhouse media relations

Zizos wanted media relations in the company name because, she says, "I knew I could do it well, and

excellence, and a healthy appreciation of mentors and advisors.

Zizos, a Cleveland native, dates the beginning of her career path to 1989 when, still in high school, she applied and was selected for the highly competitive position as a summer Congressional Page for the U.S. House of Representatives. Her

Congressman served as a mentor, providing opportunities for her to learn about the legislative process and to connect with the public. While this, she says, was an "amazing" part of her education, another duty as a Page filled her with special pride: every morning she would go to the roof of the House of Representatives and, standing



below the capitol dome, she would raise the American flag—an experience that she recalls was “empowering and beautiful.” It left her with a lasting love for Washington, and a wish to return someday.

Zizos received a scholarship to Eastern Kentucky University, where she majored in journalism.

She won awards for her articles and earned extra money freelancing for local and major mainstream publications, but writing wasn’t making her happy.

Her journalism professor suggested she try public relations. The next summer, Zizos was back in Washington, again after competing and being selected for a position — this time as an intern with the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, doing public relations. She discovered a talent she had taken for granted: the ability to be pleasantly persuasive. Her “cold calls” to Good Morning America, The Today Show, and other high-profile media outlets met with success. By the end of that summer, she was hooked on PR, had already begun to build contacts in the media, and was determined to return to the Capital. But she would have to wait.

As a result of serving as a Page, she received a Congressional Appointment the summer before her senior year at ECU to serve as an editor with the Bureau of Foreign Affairs in Seoul, Korea, an experience that broadened her horizons and again, her list of contacts.

After graduation from ECU in 1994, she returned to Washington to pursue both a master’s degree in public communications from American University and a PR career, and with a desire to learn from the best. She worked for PR firms ranked among the top ten in the business — Ketchum and Ogilvy — designing and implementing national award-winning PR campaigns, and witnessing the power of the media. She aligned herself with good mentors and moved up the ranks with them, broadening her expertise and expanding her network. At the same time, she observed and was often frustrated by inefficiencies caused by the bureaucracies of large companies. In 1996, she began to think about starting her own business,



but realized she was still “too young.”

She looked for new opportunities, and jumped at the offer to develop the public relations side of a Washington area-advertising agency, Kershner & Company, whose owner became another mentor. By fall 1998, she had established the PR business for the ad agency, learned more about running a business, and had not only set aside enough funds to start her own company but to hire “the best advisors in and around Washington.”

Her advisors include a financial advisor, a lawyer, a growth strategy consultant, a personal business consultant, and a CPA. All, except for her CPA, own their own companies. All have at least 20 years experience and are tops in their field. She listened to their advice and together they mapped out Live Wire’s business and strategic plans.

Based on her experiences in the larger agencies, Zizos wanted “to create a boutique, where we could mold ourselves to our clients needs and objectives, not handle everyone in the same way.” So with her advisors, she set out on a business plan that required her to work out of the sunroom in her house for one year to see if she could make a go of it. At the end of Live Wire’s

first year, Zizos had worked hard and brought in over \$200,000 worth of business. She moved into the Alexandria office, outfitting with everything needed to be a first-rate media relations firm and installing that simulated television studio. She recruited her first employee, a PR pro who had worked at one of the top ten PR firms, Hill & Knowlton. Together they brought in more than \$1

million in accounts, including that of multi-billion-dollar People Soft, and Zizos hired more veteran PR professionals.

So what is the secret to Live Wire’s success? It’s a combination of things, Zizos says. “It’s our services, our expertise, and our structure. We provide top-level consultation to our clients to help them establish goals, identify media targets and opportunities and, most important, we deliver results! And part of that is our intensive media training, which is designed to ensure that our clients can be effective when they are in the media.”

Zizos’ strategy has been to build Live Wire with only senior-level specialists who average 10-20 years in the industry. “I handpicked the people I had admired over the years, told them I would do things differently,” Zizos says. “We eliminated the inefficiency and hierarchy that burden bigger firms, and created a better cost-basis for our clients.” And she notes that since Live Wire has its own TV studio, she doesn’t have to worry about renting one every time she needs to do media training, which “saves money for all of us.”

A client is about to arrive to sign a contract for media training. It’s time to get on with the day’s schedule. But before seeing her visitor out, Zizos extends the tour to the roof of the building. It’s an unseasonably warm winter day. Zizos says she sometimes eats lunch up here, looking out across the Potomac to the capitol dome, and remembering where it all began.

“I feel very fortunate: I love my work and this area. Live Wire has established a solid reputation. And I enjoy being part of the business community,” says Zizos, who is a member of the Board of Directors of the Arlington County Chamber of Commerce.

She attributes a lot of her good fortune to her education at ECU. She makes several trips a year to her alma mater where she serves on the University’s Advisory Committee. Her gift of \$25,000 to ECU funds two annual journalism scholarships, one named in honor of her parents, the other in honor of her journalism professor and mentor.

Media relations professional, company president, philanthropist, and only 30 years old. What are her long-term goals?

“I just want to keep doing what I’m doing. At the end of my career, I’d like to have the best media relations company in Washington, perhaps the country.”

Chryssa Zizos seems well on her way! ■