



## **Lauren Dixon**

CEO of Dixon Schwabl

*"Forget conventionalisms; Forget what the world thinks of you stepping out of your place; think your best thoughts, speak your best words, work your best works, looking to your own conscience for approval."*

*Susan B. Anthony*

Lauren Dixon's turning point came about as a result of her being in a desperate situation; and quite literally asking herself how she was going to get out of it.

Put in a scenario where she basically had no choice but to succeed in the advertising industry, Lauren went right to the source and set up interviews with local businesses that made use of advertising agencies. She interviewed individuals from ten large businesses, ten mid-sized businesses, and ten small businesses. She asked each of them a set of questions, designed to give her a critical perspective of how the business of advertising was perceived from the side of the companies that pay for it. Among these was a query regarding which things companies most disliked about the advertising agencies they had worked with in the past.

To her surprise, Lauren found herself hearing literally the same answers repeated back at her over and over again. All thirty of the people she interviewed came back to her with the same three things that they hated about working with advertising agencies: they charged too much for production, they didn't care about the businesses they were working for, and their actual fees were always far in excess of their

estimates, sometimes nearly one-hundred times as much! Lauren saw an opportunity for success and seized upon it, making it her personal mission to both avoid these pitfalls and fill the niche left open by others in the industry. Before we get into how she did that, a bit of background information.

Lauren was the first in her family to go to college. She attended Kent State and pursued a degree in broadcasting that stemmed from her desire to connect with people. She did well there and formed many of the convictions about how to treat people that would color her approach to business later in life.

In April of 1987, Lauren found herself in something of a desperate situation. She was 31 years old and going through a divorce, with two children aged three and one and a half. She was looking to restart her life, but quickly ran into some setbacks. She had already spent many years in a career in broadcast advertising as a news anchor and as a local television sales manager. She had been looking for a change of pace when she found a promising career opportunity with the large communications company, TAFTS Broadcasting, based in Cincinnati. But just before she was set to move, her husband voiced concerns about her moving so far away with their children, and a court ultimately decided in his favor. In order to maintain the custody situation as it presently was, Lauren wasn't allowed to move outside of a 75 mile radius. By coincidence, when she left her job in broadcasting, she had signed an agreement to the effect that she wouldn't take a job in the same industry at any competing companies within a 75 mile radius!

***Lauren suddenly found herself with no job, no prospects within her chosen profession, and two small children to take care of. Seeking solace from her father, Lauren was given the advice that she should try to own her own business in order to avoid similar situations in the future. Given that she had a strong background in advertising from her broadcast career already, Lauren decided to move in that direction and had the defining, eye-opening moment that we mentioned above. Based***

*on what the companies she interviewed told her, she saw the opportunity and realized:*

**“These three things that they dislike with a passion can be my points of differentiation.”**

Having found her niche, Lauren got started. She deposited \$22.11, the entirety of her savings, into a business account and set out to get a loan. She was put into contact with a local accountant, Jim Cohen, to discuss these matters. Meeting with Jim proved to be an eye-opening experience in and of itself; he had a grim warning to offer: 94% of businesses fail within their first year, and 96% of those that make it that far fail in the following year. Determined not to become one of these statistics, Lauren structured her business plan around Jim’s advice and her commitment to the niche she had found.

It was a year marked by struggle. She worked out of her young son’s nursery and saved every possible penny. She didn’t redecorate the yellow duck wallpaper of the nursery. She didn’t eat out. She didn’t even buy underwear for an entire year. But in the end, it paid off. Having virtually no operating costs, she closed out her first year in the advertising business with 2 million dollars in billings. Quickly acquiring more and more accounts, the business really took off from there.

The proof of Lauren’s success came in 1989, when she and her partner, new husband Mike Schwabl were awarded the distinction of being placed among the top 25 small businesses to work for in the entire United States. She attributes this success to her skills in team-building, her focus on employees, and of course her commitment to fulfilling the niche established by less thoughtful competitors.

When asked where she plans to go from here, Lauren indicates that wherever she goes, she hasn’t forgotten her small-town roots. Born in a town of 200 people, she was instilled from birth with the values of a strong work ethic and the importance of charity. **Each year, she and her**

**employees have given back 2800 hours of their time to charities in their community.**

On top of this admirable pursuit, she is constantly reinventing herself. Having already met with success in two careers, she feels confident that she could do it again, and some days considers building an entirely new business from new technology that has interested her. Whatever she does, it will undoubtedly be marked by the same commitment to fulfill peoples' desires in a caring and personal way, and to adhere to and fill a niche left by her competition that has made her current endeavor such a rousing success.