Assante Hydrostone lights up the future for Atlantic businesses

No one knows about raising a beacon of hope better than the financial advisors and wealth management professionals at Assante Hydrostone in Halifax. For 30 years, this innovative practice has helped scores of small and medium-sized businesses in the Atlantic Provinces shine a light through some of the darkest times. Times like these.

It's not hard to understand how: They see the big picture; they expect the unexpected; they know that life and business are two sides of the same coin. With these guiding principles, they offer unique and tailored services, deep and rich experience, and crucial insights—born of their own entrepreneurial backgrounds—to help their clients penetrate the murk of today's business environment.

Assante Hydrostone is part of the Assante Wealth Management's community of professional financial advisors and practices. Its national network of 830 professional advisors, located across the country, administer approximately $44 billion worth of assets for thousands of clients in Canada. Within this group, Assante Hydrostone's 62 advisors and staff, with offices in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, have tended and nurtured the needs of 5,000 Atlantic Canadian families, whose assets under its attentive management have doubled in less than 10 years.

In other words, Assante Hydrostone not only sees. It listens.

"We want to hear what our clients have to say, and then take them up to that 40,000-foot view," says Senior Financial Planner Chris Ball, based in the firm's Halifax office. "What is the vision? Where is the business going to end up in five or ten years?"

Chris' Halifax colleague, Senior Financial Advisor Rob Taylor, agrees: "Clients can have their heads down so much that they never really come up and look at the whole picture. That's where we come in: To show them the forest, not just the trees."

Of course, says Financial Advisor Richard Alderman, "planning for the expected is easy. If a client wants to sell their business in 10 years, we can help our client and their professionals structure the operation so that they pay the least amount of tax, put the most amount of money their pocket. That's something we can plan for. The problem is when the unexpected shows up."

As Alderman explains: "When COVID-19 first started, we were committed to reassurance. Our role was to help clients understand more than just what was happening in the stock market. Business owners need to know what access they had to resources to help them personally and their businesses get to the other side of what we call the economic pause. Once we were able to provide that comfort, then, it was about understanding government programs, what all those programs with different acronyms—CERB, CEWS, etc.—actually did and which ones they could engage. Clients were confronted with the emotional strife of suddenly having operations that were, in some cases, completely void of revenues. Now, it's about providing guidance and sober second thought to clients who are ready to open up again."

COVID-19 is certainly a singularly

"The huge value in the depth we have across the country is that when we come across a business owner with a particular challenge, we can draw on the experience of our whole wealth planning group, which sees cases from all over Canada."

Chris Ball, Senior Financial Planner

"Taxes and succession: These are two separate issues, but both can affect one client at separate times or simultaneously. One of our key jobs is to help a client prepare for all alternative outcomes."

Richard Alderman, Financial Advisor

disruptive phenomenon but, as Rob Talyor says, the unexpected can happen anytime, anywhere, and for any reason. "We want people to understand that business owners always need to be prepared for unforeseen events and this is applicable even beyond the threat of the pandemic."

Alderman concurs: "Negative unexpected things can come in any number of ways. We act as a coach and encourage clients to save, both personally and corporately, if business goes backwards so things don't collapse on them. Clients in high growth industries often bank on that big exit down the road as their main retirement plan, for example, but sometimes that big exit may not arrive as planned."

This is where Assante's own entrepreneurial background plays a vital role. As business owners themselves, the company's advisors are uniquely positioned to counsel clients with a level of credibility and trustworthiness that's not always available in the institutional sector. They operate like coaches who understand that, in the end, the small and medium-sized business owner's life and work are fundamentally inseparable. The vagaries of one affects the condition of the other. "When you are talking about your financial wellbeing as a whole, you cannot separate your business life and your personal life," Chris Ball says. "When you make decisions, it's no good to mentally compartmentalize the personal and the business."

That's not to say Assante expects its clients to become instant experts on everything that does, or even might, affect their operations now and in the future. Quite the opposite, says Taylor: "That's what we're for. We want our business owner clients to be 100 percent focused on what they are good at, on their businesses. We look after what they don't see."

"We want our business owner clients to be 100 percent focused on what they are good at, on their businesses. We look after what they don't see."

Rob Taylor, Senior Financial Advisor

With or without a global pandemic to endure, some common blind spots involve issues concerning capital gains management, compensation planning, incorporation, corporate structure, long-term planning, taxes, and cashing in or cashing out.

Change to tax laws over the past several years, for example, need business owners and their families to be aware of new rules, such as the $50,000 passive income limit for corporations. Coordinating personal accounts, such as RSPs, with corporate investments have become much more important. Ignoring a longer-term management plan may result in losing the small business tax limit or handcuffing owners in other ways that might affect the personal well-being of their personal relations, such as spouses and dependents.

Meanwhile, high-growth oriented business owners, such as those operating in the technology sector, are often engineered to think only in terms of growth and building their business for an eventual exit. But not all start-ups end in buy-outs. Many will meet hurdles along the way, even challenges out of their control, such as a recession, which may derail an exit.

The bottom line is "a well-structured team can ensure a client is always positioned for both expected and unexpected exits from their business," Alderman says. "For example, too often we meet clients at or near the stage of exiting and they are not structured properly, resulting in them paying too much tax. Apart from tax issues, business owners also need to be thinking who will manage their business should something happen to them. Does the business have the funds to hire a replacement for them and continue to support the family? Taxes and succession: These are two separate issues, but both can affect one client at separate times or simultaneously. One of our key jobs is to help a client prepare for all alternative outcomes."

To this he adds: "Every business owner has his own unique set of circumstances. Every business is different and so, therefore, is the advice we give every business owner. Some philosophies hold true across the spectrum, but no single business owner gets the exact same advice as the next business owner."

What all Assante's clients do get, however, is a level of expertise that's tailored to their individual needs, from both the Halifax office and the broader corporate family across the country. "Through Assante's national and regional team of lawyers and accountants we have access to in-depth technical knowledge in all fields. This allows us to educate our clients and assist them in integrating the various disciplines in a way that suits their unique needs and those of their families," Taylor says.

Indeed, notes Ball, "The huge value in the depth we have across the country is that when we come across a business owner with a particular challenge, we can draw on the experience of our whole wealth planning group, which sees cases from all over Canada. That's the way we keep our clients safe and secure in the knowledge that they are getting the advice that's right for them and the people who depend on them."

And how, it's safe to say, Assante Hydrostone (assantehydrostone.com) keeps the beacon of hope alight for thousands of Atlantic families in even the darkest of times.