

Where There's a Will ...

By Jill Schachner Chanen

A lightbulb went on above James Haroutunian's head after watching countless women buy jewelry from his wife via the home-based sales parties she organized.

Intrigued with the business model, the Billerica, Mass., lawyer learned that his wife's typical customer was a young mother who appreciated the convenience of after-hours shopping in someone's home. A few more questions revealed another important commonality: Not a single woman had invested in estate planning for her family.

The women had plenty of reasons why. Many didn't know any lawyers. If they did, they didn't want the hassle of hiring a baby sitter or taking off time from work to go to a lawyer's office. And then there was just that inherent layman's unease with the idea of even meeting with a lawyer.

That's when everything started to click.

Haroutunian decided to follow the business model that had made his wife's business so successful—you know, the one that dates back to the classic Tupperware party.

Earlier this year, he launched a promotion called "Have Kids, Will Party." But guests leave this party with a set of properly executed and witnessed estate planning documents.

Like every other home-based sales party, Haroutunian's model relies on one client's ability to recruit others. The client-cum-party-host assembles a group of other young parents in need of basic estate planning services.

Once a group has committed to the party, Haroutunian sends each family a questionnaire to complete to help him draft their estate planning documents.

He also follows up with each couple in a series of telephone conferences before sending review drafts in advance of the will-signing party.

When the party date rolls around, Haroutunian mingles with his guests for a short time and then makes a brief presentation on estate planning before retreating into a private room—usually the kitchen—to meet with each couple separately. There he can review their documents, answer questions and—most important—get the paperwork signed and witnessed.

Haroutunian's work usually is done in about 90 minutes, leaving his guests the rest of their evening to party on, knowing they've done something good for themselves and their families.

The formula is not for everyone, though. Haroutunian says that it works best for young families who do not have sophisticated estate planning needs. His party package includes a basic will and a health care proxy and durable power of attorney for each spouse.

The preliminary questionnaire and phone calls allow him to cull out clients whose needs don't fit the party format.

With three of these parties under his belt, Haroutunian has been tinkering with the formula a bit.

He originally planned to waive his \$395 package fee for the host couple, but he learned that could get him in trouble with the bar. Instead, he's offering a sliding fee schedule based on the number of partygoing clients.

For every couple at the party, Haroutunian discounts his \$500 fee by \$25.

"So there is motivation to have a bigger party," says Haroutunian, a solo practitioner.

Haroutunian has been relying on good old-fashioned grassroots marketing to get his will-signing business rolling. Word has slowly leaked out around the Boston area with a little bit of marketing to local parent groups. He has another five will-signing parties booked.

But Haroutunian thinks his take on the Tupperware party could be just as big. He's contemplating creating a franchise for the will-signing party, and he thinks there will be no shortage of takers. In fact, just the other day, he says, an Ohio attorney who got wind of the idea called him to learn more.

Haroutunian, ever the perfect host, was only too happy to share.