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# An Executive Downshifts From Marketing Fast Lane

By ELIZABETH GARONE

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As a busy marketing executive, Susanne Lyons always wanted a dog but never had time for one. But all that changed last year when Ms. Lyons "pre-tired," as she describes her early retirement from the fast lane. Today, she has a dog named Izzy, and time to walk her every day.



Susanne Lyons

At 50, she wasn't looking for full-fledged retirement, rather a lifestyle change and a chance to do things she didn't get to do during her career. Today, she sits on a handful of boards and consults with businesses and people looking for marketing expertise. In her free time, she works at her children's schools, volunteers at the local wildlife-rehabilitation center, exercises and gardens.

As a French major in the late 1970s, Ms. Lyons thought she might pursue a career in international business. She went to graduate business school at Boston University, where she says she found her passion: marketing. She graduated in 1982, which, with a recession and banking woes, wasn't a good year for M.B.A.s. Ms. Lyons turned to temp work. That decision turned out to be one of her best early career moves, she says. She stayed with the company, Fidelity Investments, for 10 years, moving up from temp to senior vice president of marketing. Her success got her noticed by officials at Charles Schwab and she was recruited to the company.

### Stepping Off

Susanne Lyons offers the following advice for leaving the rat race:

- **Know your motivators.** Take the things you really enjoy from the first stage of your career and figure out a way to translate those passions into the next stage.
- **Plant the seeds.** Don't wait until you have left your job to decide what you are going to do next. Establish relationships, join a board, or meet with people in the area in which you're interested.
- **Be selective.** People are afraid they won't be busy and jump at whatever someone throws at them. Think of it like fishing. Wait for the right things and throw back what you don't want.

Over 10 years, she moved into several positions, starting as senior vice president of marketing and ending as chief marketing officer. "Often in my career, despite the fact that I go on many little sidelines, it always ends up coming back to that core passion for marketing," she says.

One of those sidelines, right after leaving Schwab in 2001, was a yearlong stint as an executive recruiter. The timing, she says, couldn't have been better. A recruitment client sat on the board of Visa. "He actually started the ball rolling to say, 'I think you are the person they need to hire over at Visa,'" recalls Ms. Lyons.

Ms. Lyons spent three years at Visa as the chief marketing officer. During that time, she introduced the well-known "Life takes Visa" campaign. When Visa went public last year and moved its offices 90 minutes away from her home in Northern California, Ms. Lyons, now 51, thought it would be a good time to leave. "I decided to make a lifestyle change and kind of move on to my second act," she says.

Her board positions include CNET, Marketo, Epoch and WildCare, the wildlife-rehab center where she volunteers. With CNET's recent purchase by CBS, Ms. Lyons says she has worked herself out of a job and is open to finding a new position with a well-known public company -- something she tells everyone she meets, she says. "In my experience, in a couple of months, something great will come along."

The companies whose boards she sits on appreciate her insights. She is able to bring "invaluable in-the-trenches and 'been there, done that' experience" to the board, says Phil Fernandez, the president and CEO of Marketo, a business-to-business marketing-software company.

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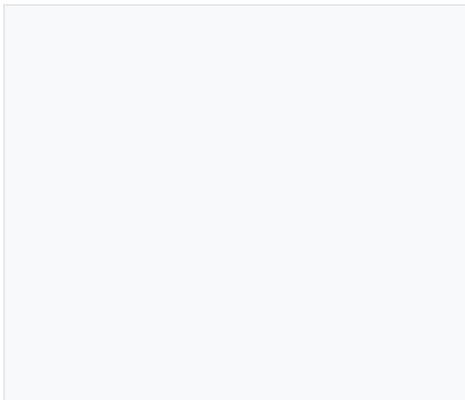
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