

Make me a match

Solicitor Yuri Rapoport set up Prime Law Brokers in 1995 and law graduate Sohila Zanjani went to work for him. She now runs the business from Mt Eliza while Yuri lives in London. They talked to **Lucinda Schmidt**

SOHILA ZANJANI

I first met Yuri on November 24, 1996. It's a very clear memory for me. I saw an advertisement on the Monash law faculty notice board for a graduate. I was very hesitant because it was not for a law firm, but I was desperate because my 52 applications for articled clerk positions had all been rejected.

I went to his home office in South Yarra. He seemed very genuine, very intelligent and very young looking. I told him: "I have come from Iran, I'm the mother of four children, I am a sole parent pensioner." He said, "I am Jewish." I told him, "I will stand by you and I will never ever let you down."

I am Muslim, but I don't consider myself a Muslim anymore. Both of us understood we live in Australia and religion was not really coming into this. We had a common goal.

Yuri became more of an older brother, even though I'm older. He was never really like my boss. I didn't have any business background and I had a high-pitched voice. I didn't have a professional telephone manner. I was so nervous. He'd tell me "too fast" when I was on the phone. He was harsh with me, but I know he wanted to make me a true professional.

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I worked with him for 15 months before he went overseas in 1998, when he married, and left me in charge. He said to me, "This is my baby and I put it into your hands." I told him, "I'm a very good mum and I will look after your baby." Until 2002, we had almost no contact. I honestly didn't know where he was. Then I called a friend of his and obtained Yuri's email address. I had the most beautiful news for him: that Prime was thriving. That promise I gave him was fulfilled.

Now he's always helpful if I have a problem. We have almost daily emails and phone calls. I can't recall a major disagreement. I tend to follow Yuri's advice; I've always felt he knows what he's talking about. Prime is going to the UK and he's involved me, and that's an honour. If Yuri says, "Now Sohila, go to planet Mars," I would not hesitate. That's how much I trust him.

Yuri is a master of time. And he's super-intelligent. I absolutely think he's 100 years ahead of his time. He's very logical, but also very kind. His only weakness is that I trust everyone and he doesn't – but that's not a weakness. And I put up with crap more than he does. I have handled the phone for 12 years, 24/7, with 260,000 referrals. At 3am I answer the phone. I'm not sure if Yuri would.

YURI RAPOPORT

I started Prime Law Brokers [which refers people with legal problems to relevant lawyers] after two years' working as a solicitor at a big national firm. I'd always been an entrepreneur at heart, which is why I studied law, to learn a discipline that was relevant to business.

I first met Sohila when she answered my advertisement. When you give people who have minimal chance a chance to do something, as a rule they will try that bit harder. I saw it as an opportunity rather than a problem. What I saw in her was a passion for what I was doing, and I think she felt a sense of almost destiny. Her dedication was a way to show gratitude to me for giving her that chance.

The work relationship was very intense because we were starting a new business. I was interstate a lot, so I needed someone very reliable to man the office and hold the base. Initially I worked with the solicitors and she spoke to the clients. When people ring, they want someone very professional. Her English language was perfect, but there was an accent to it. I come from an ethnic background too – I came from Russia at the age of seven – so I could empathise.

Our different religious backgrounds were never even discussed, as far as I can remember. It's not been an issue for me. I have a very tolerant mentality and I'm not a practising Jew. The most obvious difference between us is that I'm a man and she's a woman. She's very emotional and I'm very rational. It is a difference that is complementary and helps us solve the problem together.

I put the company on a fairly solid foundation before I left, but it was a very difficult decision to make. I thought the business would survive, I thought the momentum had been developed. And I thought I would only be away for six months or so. I think the business is still mine, to a large extent. We've never really had to sit down and draw the line. Sohila offers me payment all the time for my advice. I choose not to take payment. I think probably one of the secrets of our success is there is no financial question there. My interest is philanthropic, to a large extent.

We email every day. I have to draw on a lot of experience of Prime that Sohila has processed, for me to set up in the UK. It's almost a reverse situation, me picking her brains. She's been extremely meticulous at recording everything; there's an enormous wealth of information.

Our toughest times are when we are challenged by the legal community. We've had lawsuits with the Yellow Pages, to be listed. She relies on my expertise, approach and strategy. That sort of strains my comfort zone. It puts the pressure on me. Obviously I do as much as I can.

I see her struggling through these problems. It's almost like parents struggling over the survival of their child. The mother says to the father, "You tell me what to do." It would not be fair to say she doesn't take a proactive role – she handles the whole thing – but precisely following my advice." **B**



■ Sohia Zanjani and
Yuri Rapoport