

BUSINESS

Business Notes, D2
Classified Advertising, D3

One-on-one important to financial adviser

Planner felt disconnect in corporate world

BY STEFANIE MURRAY
News Business Reporter

Once an aspiring professional cellist and film director, Rob Oliver never did make any of the Spike Lee-inspired movies he dreamed of as a University of Michigan undergraduate.

Instead, Oliver moved into the business world after college and landed in New York City as an equity analyst, later moving to an executive development program at a large Massachusetts insurance company while his wife attended law school.

He grew disenchanted with the corporate financial services world after witnessing the inherent conflicts of interest in the industry, at places that advise both large companies and individual shareholders, for example, where the number of products sold and profit made is most important.

He thought he could do it better. "I wanted to help people but do what was in their best interest. I was too far removed in the corporate world - it was hard to see the fruits of (my) labor," Oliver said. "I found I have a passion for talking about personal financial issues on a one-on-one basis."

In 2005, Oliver formed Oliver Financial Planning, an Ann Arbor-based hourly, fee-only financial planning and registered investment advisory firm. His hourly rate averages \$150 an hour and preparation of a typical, detailed financial plan starts at \$2,000.

Q: Tell us about Oliver Financial Planning and what you do.

A: I offer conflict-free financial planning and advice for mostly individuals and families. It means I am compensated solely by my clients and have no outside influence from broker/dealers, mutual funds, insurance companies. ... It means I can provide unbiased financial advice. ... I have no restrictions in terms of assets or income. You just have to have a need for financial planning advice.

Q: What does fee-only mean?

A: Fee-only means that you do not accept commission or referral fees. It means the client is the sole provider of compensation to the planner. ... Fee-based is not the same as fee-only, however. Fee-based accepts commissions.

Q: Your bachelor's degree is in film. Tell us about your early career plans.

A: When I entered college, I was very humanities-based. I started in the music school in cello performance. I learned very quickly that it would be a struggle to work as a pro-



Financial planner Rob Oliver studied music and film at the University of Michigan, wound up in corporate financial services and now runs an hourly, fee-only financial planning and registered investment advisory firm in Ann Arbor.

SMALL BUSINESS

essional musician. I changed my focus to film and video studies with the intent of going to graduate school and making a film, but soon realized - the more practical side of me didn't want to go down that difficult route, either. I grew up with not a lot of money and didn't like the idea of living paycheck to paycheck or not even. So I combined my interest in the arts and business and went to work for a violin maker, Curtin & Alf in Ann Arbor.

Q: So how did you move from that to the investment world?

A: After three years working at Curtin & Alf, an opportunity became available in New York (City). I did a 180 (degree turn) and took a job with an investment bank and I did equity research there, mostly focused on chemical companies.

SEE OLIVER, PAGE D2

Rob Oliver

Founder and principal, Oliver Financial Planning

■ Age: 35.

■ Residence: Ann Arbor.

■ Hometowns: Ann Arbor and Bradenton, Fla.

■ Family: Wife Alyson Robbins; twin 8-month-old daughters.

■ Education: Bachelor's degree in film and video studies from the University of Michigan; master's degree in business administration from U-M.

■ Certifications: Certified financial planner and chartered financial analyst.

■ Previous jobs: Equity research analyst; project management with a Fortune 500 financial services firm; sales and marketing with Ann Arbor violin makers Curtin & Alf.

■ Estimated startup costs: \$20,000 in 2005.

■ Contact information: 734-926-0022; www.oliverfinancialplanning.com.

GM's Volt signals greening initiatives

New image seen as key to future sales success

BY NEAL E. BOUDETTE
The Wall Street Journal

Five years ago, General Motors Corp. gave the world the Hummer H2, a vehicle so fuel-thirsty that GM took advantage of a federal loophole that allowed the company not to publish its estimated mileage.

Today, the No. 1 U.S. auto maker by sales, usually the most conservative of Detroit's Big Three, has assigned hundreds of engineers and millions of dollars to an effort to become the greenest company in the auto industry.

Engineering teams at GM's technical center in Warren are scrambling to turn a recently unveiled electric concept car into a production vehicle within three to four years. This month, GM kicked off a drive to hire 400 technical experts to work on fuel-saving technology and other innovations, and became the first auto maker to sign up for a cap-and-trade system for carbon emissions, which are blamed for global warming.

This year, GM's research labs are scheduled to turn its hydrogen fuel-cell technology over to an engineering group that prepares new powertrains for commercial launch, a sign of increased determination to put hydrogen-powered vehicles on the road.

GM executives acknowledge it is unclear whether these advanced-technology vehicles will ever come to market, much less generate a profit. The auto maker, as with companies in others industries, has concluded it can no longer wait and see how the public debate on global

warming and the world economy's increasing thirst for oil plays out. A big consideration in this change: GM fears it will sell fewer cars if consumers associate it with gas guzzlers.

"We have to have people think we are part of the solution, not part of the problem," said Lawrence Burns, GM's vice president for research and development and global planning. The rush to produce its electric vehicle, known as the Chevrolet Volt, is in large part an effort to show consumers that "we get it" on climate change, Mr. Burns said. "It's not just words. It's deeds."

GM declined to disclose its spending on these new technologies, but people inside and outside the company said it appears to be devoting significant resources to the effort.

GM is working to restructure its unprofitable North American auto operations and recently lost the mantle of the world's No. 1 auto maker by output to Toyota Motor Corp., maker of the Prius gasoline-electric hybrid, which can go about 50 miles on a gallon of gas. Efforts by the Detroit company and its rivals to revamp their operations and offer more fuel-efficient vehicles come amid rapid changes in the social and political climate driven by worries about oil and the environment. That is forcing U.S. auto makers to apply a different kind of calculus to green technology - a shift that over time could change what Detroit offers Americans to drive.

GM executives acknowledge it is unclear whether these advanced-technology vehicles will ever come to market, much less generate a profit. The auto maker, as with companies in others industries, has concluded it can no longer wait and see how the public debate on global

SEE GM, PAGE D2

As Pfizer workers scramble to sell homes, neighbors fear plunging values

Pfizer is the buzz of real estate circles around town now, but the talk isn't about a flood of homes being listed for sale in an already inventory-laden market.

The chatter is purely about price.

What many feared might happen because of Pfizer's generous relocation plan for those staying with the company appears to be reality. Since Pfizer will reimburse workers who accept a transfer up to \$100,000 to make up the difference between the sale price and market value of a home, some people are dropping the price well below market value to sell it fast.

I've even heard from at least one home buyer who is shopping "Pfizer homes" only, scouting for bargains.

For Pfizer workers, the benefit is clear: The house gets sold, their family is able to move, they get paid the



STEFANIE MURRAY
The Ann Arbor News

home's market value.

But neighbors like Corey and Tracie Faupel fear the value of their homes will take a hit.

The couple has two young children and lives in the Pheasant Ridge neighborhood in Lima Township near Chelsea. Faupel runs CTC Technologies Inc. an Ann Arbor-based information technology company.

They built their four-bedroom home on three acres in 2002 and paid \$380,145 for it. Its 2007 market value, according to city tax records, is

about \$411,000.

Neighbors Corey and Amy Stanchina, who also have two young children, bought their four-bedroom home on four acres in early 2006 for \$375,000 when Pfizer transferred the couple to Ann Arbor. Its 2007 market value, according to county tax records, is \$376,000.

This spring, the Stanchinas accepted another transfer, this time to Pfizer's Groton, Conn. site, after the pharmaceutical giant announced it planned to close its Ann Arbor site.

The Stanchinas have been with Pfizer for eight years. He's a synthetic chemist; she works in regulatory affairs.

The couple listed their home at \$344,900 in April, a price below what they paid but consistent with the restrictive local buyer's market, Amy Stanchina said. After one week with no interest

and with Pfizer's relocation package and reimbursement guarantee behind them - the couple decided that to move by June, they would have to drop their asking price - by \$15,000 - to \$329,900.

One evening soon after, Amy Stanchina went to the Faupel's home, rang the doorbell and apologized to Tracie Faupel.

The Faupels were shocked at the price drop - especially because they knew the actual sale price could be even lower.

"From what our house is worth and what our neighbors' house will sell for, the difference is close to \$100,000 and it's just sickening," Corey Faupel said. "We're screwed. We're not going to be able to go anywhere."

Intensifying the Faupels' anxiety is the fact they have several other Pfizer neighbors, a few of whom also have

listed their homes for sale. While they aren't planning to move soon, the Faupels fear a rash of below-market sales will bring down the value of all houses in their small subdivision, at a time when the market is already pushing values down.

But Amy Stanchina said Pfizer is not to blame. The couple sold the house and plan to move this month. The final sale price was not available.

"The market and the economy here were already in bad shape," she said. "It's not about just dropping (the price) to sell it and bail. You want to sell it, but do the best you can (for the neighborhood)."

But Dawn Foerg of Edward Surovell Realtors cautions folks to have faith in the long-term real estate market.

"People in the industry will recognize this as an unusual

occurrence," she said about the exodus of Pfizer workers and their aggressive home sale prices, noting that an appraiser or agent will take that into consideration before using recently-sold neighboring homes as comparables.

Still, it's disconcerting, especially if you're surrounded by Pfizer homes up for sale.

If you have something to say about Pfizer and its impact on the real estate market, whether it's affecting you or not, contact me at smurray@annarbornews.com or call me at 734-994-6932.

This is an important issue for many people, and it's a topic The News will revisit. The more voices we can include in the discussion, the better.

Stefanie Murray covers retail, real estate, small business and banking.

CUSTOM TRANSIT INC.

Ann Arbor's Premier Airport Service

CUSTOM TRANSIT WILL GET YOU THERE!

Great Price. **(734) 971-5555** Reliable Service.

Area's most reliable airport shuttle - \$28 and up.
Private vehicle service in sedans and vans - \$51 and up.

Taxis Sedans Vans

1711689-01

Startup costs were reasonable

Q: It must have been hard moving from the highly structured corporate world to being on your own.

A: That's the scary part of being a small business owner, but I did have my wife, with her job and benefits and frankly, we saved some money before I went ahead and did this. Luckily, I've been profitable from my first year. My startup costs were reasonable and my ongoing expenses aren't out of line. ... You have to treat your business as if you are working for someone else and that person just happens to be you. The freedom can have a downside – it's easy to let the day slip away from you. Since I work on an hourly basis (for clients), it's easy for me to keep track of my hours.

Q: How would you like to grow the business?

A: I would like to add two or so paraplanners, equivalent to a paralegal, someone with a background in financial planning. But I don't have much ambition to build it beyond that; perhaps I'll add a small business component. I want it to stay personal. It's about relationships.

Q: What's the most common financial mistake you see people make?

A: The biggest mistake is likely not saving enough, not paying yourself first. And second, it's not being inquisitive enough about their investments and the fees they pay.

The Small Business Q&A appears on Mondays. To nominate a small business owner for this feature, contact business reporter Stefanie Murray at smurray@annarbornews.com or 734-994-6932. Tips also may be faxed to 734-994-6879 or mailed to Small Business Q&A, The Ann Arbor News, P.O. Box 1147, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.