

How advisor is building for the future after doubling AUM

After enhancing client care, portfolio manager attracted more business during pandemic and has her sights set on \$1 billion

Wealth Professional • January 12, 2022

By Noelle Boughton

Alexandra Horwood, investment advisor and portfolio manager for Alexandra Horwood & Partners with Richardson Wealth, remembers the harsh beginnings of the pandemic. But volatility and uncertainty created an opportunity. She has almost doubled her assets under management since March 2020 and is eagerly building her future.

“It was the sharpest, most severe decline in the history of the stock market. I was sitting at my desk at 7 p.m. watching the markets plummet,” she told *Wealth Professional*. “At 34, I represent a more youthful and disruptive advisor group. Although I have 11 years of experience, I was not an investment advisor during the great recession of 2008-2009, so this was my first severe financial and global crisis to navigate.

“In my opinion, it was much different and scarier for clients, because not only were the markets crashing, but they felt the world was coming to an end, and many people felt their lives were at risk. There was so much fear. Some people felt paralysed or isolated, and many were losing their jobs. The world was shutting down around them. Even I was in shock at our new reality.”

Horwood’s management sent an email on Sunday afternoon instructing employees and partners to work from home. She and her team members returned to the office and hosted a nine a.m. conference call for clients who were panicking to reassure them, and gathered their laptops and supplies.

“It was challenging to mobilize the team with all the intricate technology we require to do our job,” she said, noting that remote access technology was not available globally. “Once we had the technology required, and my team was able to navigate working from home, our day-to-day operations improved.

“Thankfully, I had been proactively enabled to work from home, having had two young children while running my business. We are a younger, tech-savvy team, and all



our clients’ important documentation had been stored electronically and encrypted in a team share drive. Thankfully, we were not tasked with migrating from paper to digital like many advisory teams. That put us ahead of the game because the most important thing at that time was for me to be there for all my clients and my team, calling them to provide them with comfort.”

Horwood hosted weekly calls with many clients as well as her team — some of whom were isolated, home-schooling children, or had spouses who lost jobs. She ensured they had the resources, and holidays, they needed to prevent burnout.

“Prior to the pandemic, I was growing my business rapidly. I was receiving so many referrals, and then, suddenly, it stopped, and I transitioned into pure maintenance and comfort mode. So, instead of focusing time with potential clients and growing my business,” she said, “I spent 100% of my time with my valued clients, reassuring them and

proactively taking advantage of buying opportunities that the pandemic created in the market.”

Horwood cancelled appreciation events, but sent personalized gifts, and started virtual meetings, especially for clients who were particularly anxious, even though she said portfolios only temporarily declined by about one-third of the market drawdown.

“I’m a fairly conservative wealth manager,” she said. “Our balanced and diversified portfolios were well protected from market risk and appreciated in the upside of the market recovery.”

She also heard more clients than ever wanted to discuss and plan for retirement. They wanted a plan to ensure their investments could get them there.

“Our team has completed more retirement plans, projections, and proposals in the past year than in the ten years prior, combined,” said Horwood. “Many clients were rethinking their priorities and wanted a roadmap to get them there. They realized life is short and they were seeing people they care about close to them get sick or pass away.”

Horwood found that her clients were feeling more settled by the end of 2020, when the markets had mostly recovered. Clients remained calmer in 2021, even when the markets remained volatile, but favourable, since she said, “I do feel most people have accepted that we are going to be in this for a while.”

She’s back to growing her business, which was slower in 2020, but has been “growing like crazy again in 2021”. Her assets under management were \$311 million at the end of 2019, \$261 million at the end of March 2020 — primarily because of the markets — and \$492 million by the end of 2021.

She’s only grown her client households from 200 in March 2020 to 220 in late 2021, but she’s increasing the threshold size for clients she works with and is focusing on growing her existing clients’ wealth substantially.

“Market growth was meaningful, but our growth is mostly based on gaining new client relationships and our long-term clients trusting us with more of their hard-earned wealth,” said Horwood. She noted that some of her clients sold their businesses and she’s been getting many referrals, particularly from clients who have transferred from other advisors after feeling financially vulnerable in the 2020 crash and wanting to ensure that they can safely retire soon.

“The reason why I believe clients want to work with us is they like and trust me and my team. They are seeking a specialist with a holistic focus,” she said, noting that, when she onboards clients, she reviews their investments, tax returns, wills, power of attorney, insurance, and benefits with a team of specialists to ensure everything is in order and properly reflects their personalized needs and goals.

“It is paramount that we understand our clients’ goals and have a roadmap to get them there. We leave no stone unturned,” said Horwood. “Investors want an advisor to be their quarterback, to coordinate with their tax accountant or lawyer, to form a board of trusted advisors around them, make their life easier, and provide them with peace of mind.”

While Horwood is pleased with how she and her team have steered through the pandemic and supported clients, she’s also glad they maintained some work-life balance. Having been able to return to the office in the fall of 2021 before Omicron hit, they are also looking forward to being in their new waterfront office in the fall of 2022 and, hopefully, returning to more in-person client meetings and events then.

As for what the future holds, Horwood said, “my goal is to be managing a billion dollars by the time I’m 40. I’m 34 and managing half a billion, so I believe my goal is achievable with the right structure and support. I want to be a good mom and wife, prioritize my own health, and grow my business strategically with my team, mentoring them so they can take on more responsibility and grow in their roles, so that we reach that billion-dollar goal together. From there, we’ll have to determine what is beyond a billion.”