

The business of helping kids get into college

- 1 Getting into college is something worth celebrating but the process of getting into college 26. In 2007, Neha Gupta was a recent college graduate, and the memory of applying to schools was still fresh: It was a confusing experience that sparked arguments with her parents and left Gupta feeling isolated. To bring in cash, she started offering to help parents and students navigate the intense, draining application process, and as her clientele grew, College Shortcuts was born. Today, the Houston-based business has nearly 100 Ivy League-educated employees helping teens across the country target potential schools and perfect their applications while providing a heavy dose of emotional support.
- 2 “This company started with \$500 and a really ugly logo,” Gupta says. “A friend who was a graphic designer helped me with it, and it was hideous. We had nothing. The phone number on our website was my cell number.” To drum up early business in a world that hadn’t yet been transformed by social media, Gupta went analog: “I put an ad in the newspaper just to see if families needed assistance.”
- 3 When prospective clients reached out, Gupta would arrange an in-person-meeting: essentially an interview in which students’ parents decided whether or not she was trustworthy. “Being the nerd that I was, I showed up to people’s homes in a suit with a two-page résumé in hand,” she says. It helped her win over moms and dads, and as a young 20-something, she was more easily seen as an ally by teens. “We’re not the nagging parent or the crusty counselor,” she says. “We’re the helpful sibling. Once people saw that, moms were like, ‘You’re hired.’”
- 4 Gupta was a one-woman show at first. However, she had exhausted her bandwidth within three months. “Our first employees were friends of mine, other top students who wanted to do this part-time,” she says. Before too long, she was getting requests from outside Houston. (“Moms talk,” Gupta says.) As she considered a long-term plan to scale, she focused on taking advantage of new technologies that were already being embraced by teens. “I could have opened an office in other cities and been a blip in those markets, but we’re in a time when the internet enables you to have



a team all over the country,” she says. “We can embrace video chat, work with kids across the country, and have the same impact.”

- 5 As the company has evolved over the past 12 years, one thing has remained constant: Gupta and her team acknowledge and embrace that their clients are at a complicated moment in their lives. “I look at my competitors and it’s a lot of data-driven males using technology to give XYZ results,” she says. “That’s great and we have data as well but this is about someone’s child leaving home for the first time. We make it clear that we have the heart to help these students go from teen to adult.”

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