

## THE FIRST YEAR IN BUSINESS – FOUR LESSONS LEARNED

"I am going to make fresh, organic food for kids. It will be fun." Little did I know that what I was actually saying was "I am going to enter into the food manufacturing industry with no experience". The business was actually launched in early 2007 producing organic meals for children in Salem, Oregon. A reflection on my first year has yielded four lessons learned.

**Lesson 1:** In hindsight I believe that very naiveté is what carried my company through those first few months. I had no idea that what I set out to do is nearly impossible, which made my grand visions attainable. However, I have not been able to do it on my own. The key principle, I believe, is to surround oneself with exceptional and experienced people. Not necessarily your friends, but trusted people who you know to have different skill sets than your own — people who will "tell you as it is." Finding said people is not an easy task. One thing I was told early on from an investor is that he was not investing in my product or company, he was investing in me. You attract talented people by selling yourself as an entrepreneur first and selling the actual business concept second. Dealing with rejection is just part of the game in these early stages. You must be able to put yourself out there by picking up the telephone and participating in any event you can find to sell yourself. Eventually, if you are interesting, passionate and simply a person people want to be around, the talented people will come.

**Lesson 2:** The drive that exists in an entrepreneur is what keeps you working when everyone else has gone home and refuses to take no for an answer. This is the force behind a brand-new company and the sole reason an idea is transformed into a passion. However, this same entrepreneur must recognize when to shift roles from the excited driving force to the reserved strategic planner and leader. I have found this transformation to be critical as someone must be looking at the big picture. As a company grows and begins to gain momentum, somebody must be "steering the ship."

**Lesson 3:** Cash is king. If you are out of cash, you are out of business. We hear about it all the time, but how true it is. As new businesses we must find new and sometimes creative ways to preserve our working capital.

**Lesson 4:** People talk and write often about time management. But when you are the president of a company, especially a new company, you must be spending time, effort and resources on activities that are immediately relevant, necessary and profitable. My personality tends to be people pleasing and polite. I am happy to speak with anyone who shares my passion for organic foods, healthy eating for kids and sustainable practices to save our planet. Although this all makes for great and inspiring conversation, it is not always the best use of resources.

The four lessons I learned are people, leadership, cash flow and resource management when starting a company. However, I believe the real challenge is constant improvement and always being willing to learn new lessons. Our job as business leaders in a company is never complete. This is what makes life as an entrepreneur so challenging and so rewarding.

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