



For some, business acumen just comes naturally

By FRANCINE PARNES
For The Associated Press

To measure up to his official title of "marketing guru" at an Internet company, Mark Hughes hatched and rejected a lot of gimmicks before finally deciding that the business, Half.com, should pay the town of Halfway, Ore., \$100,000 to rename itself Half.com for a year. The national publicity was enormous.

Cameron Johnson of Blacksburg, Va., started his first Internet company at age 9, selling greeting cards. Next, he bought his sister's Beanie Baby collection for \$100, resold it on eBay for \$1,000, then expanded, and by age 12 had made \$50,000. As a high school freshman, he sold ads on the Internet, pulling in as much as \$15,000 a day.

Sig Anderman came out of retirement in Sonoma County, Calif., when his "eureka" moment told him that somebody should figure out how to provide mortgage brokers instant Internet access to all documents that comprise a closing. He talked up the idea to a venture capitalist and created a company called Ellie Mae. In 2004, his Web site made Inc. magazine's list of America's 500 fastest-growing private companies.

Seizing opportunities that no one else seems to notice is a defining trait - if not the core trait - of the American entrepreneur, according to Brent Bowers, who ferreted out the stories of such business swashbucklers for his new book, "If at First You Don't Succeed: The Eight Patterns of Highly Effective Entrepreneurs" (Currency/Doubleday).

"One surprising thing is that many of the products and services that entrepreneurs come up with seem like treasures that are hidden in plain sight," Bowers said in an interview.

Bowers covered entrepreneurs during a stint as small-business editor of The New York Times, and before that as a reporter and editor for the Wall Street Journal. He often wondered what set them apart, so he interviewed three dozen entrepreneurs over the course of a year.

Next, drawing on the expertise of business consultants, academics and venture capitalists, he boiled down his research to 30 traits common to highly effective entrepreneurs, then identified eight patterns that he considered most salient.

Besides seizing opportunities, they include: a desire to run your own show, innovative behavior since childhood, flexibility, doggedness, self-confidence, pragmatism and the ability to "fail upward."

"In most of the world, failure is seen as a disgrace," says Bowers. "But in the United States, nobody holds it against you. Some entrepreneurs almost brag about their bloopers. As one of the experts I talked to told me, they consider making a mess of things practically a badge of honor so long as they take stock of what went wrong and learn from it."

Judith Cone, vice president of entrepreneurship at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, a \$1.7 billion organization in Kansas City, Mo., that does research on entrepreneurial activity, agrees with Bowers' conclusions.

"His book takes the mystery out of being an entrepreneur and reveals it for what it is: being a leader who understands customers and markets, believes in the product or service, is dedicated, puts in hard work, is stubborn, resilient and lucky," Cone says.

It's important to understand entrepreneurs, Bowers says, because "America's culture is deeply and vigorously entrepreneurial.

"That vigor is a magnet. It pulls in so many immigrants eager to leave behind not only poverty, but also bureaucracy, corruption, overregulation and sometimes downright hostility to their entrepreneurial ambition. And besides attracting hardworking, hustling people to our shores, American entrepreneurialism gives us an edge in the competition for global markets."

There are nearly 24 million entrepreneurs in the United States, the author says. "That's 11 percent of the adult population. No other country scores that high."

Small businesses account for more than half of America's gross domestic product, he says, adding that hundreds of American colleges and universities now offer courses in entrepreneurship, up from just 16 in 1970.

Among other stories he cites:

- Kevin Plank winged it in the athletic clothing market by filling an order in four days for a garment he'd never previously made. A football team needed thermal undershirts for a Saturday game. On Tuesday, Plank grabbed elastic fabric; on Wednesday, his contractor manufactured the shirts; on Thursday, they were shipped; on Friday, they arrived. Plank later launched Under Armour Performance Apparel in the basement of his grandmother's house in Washington, D.C. It became a \$240 million company with 450 employees.
- James Poss, the "princeling of tinkerers," hunkered down in his basement from age 8, assembling and disassembling toys, appliances and whatever else. He rigged crossbows and battery-powered fans, and mixed and matched parts from rocket kits. His curiosity led him to found Seahorse Power Company, which makes solar-powered trash compactors.

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