

Attention Deficit Serial Entrepreneur Perspective on the Indianapolis Venture/Entrepreneur Support Infrastructure

In the past couple weeks I've been asked to comment on the Venture Center's plans for the 2005 Venture Conference. I'm happy to do so because I think promoting the venture/start-up community is very important in Indianapolis. My own experience was not that positive. I think that was because there was a disconnect between my expectations, needs and my prospect as a consumer of the venture industry's services.

Starting a business presents an amazingly complex bundle of issues to an entrepreneur. I liken it to a simultaneous set of equations that must be solved. The goal is to find the coefficients for all the terms that create a sustainable business. At minimum they include creating a profitable business model, developing a compelling product or service, staffing key functions like sales, service, production, accounting, etc, arranging for financing, complying with inscrutable regulations and laws, etc. etc. Added to these problems are family issues, leadership, training, advertising, competitive strategy, vendor relations . . . it's a wonder that even fewer business succeed than the reported 5% or so.

I have been self employed for 28 years. All my businesses have had something to do with technology. I've nearly always employed people and paid them well. Aside from some sales tax problems which were the result of simple confusion, I think the state would consider me a good 'customer'.

When I came up with my FileEngine idea I felt that I had the kind of opportunity that the local venture community would favor. It could reasonably achieve multi-million dollar sales, we've already demonstrated the model with real customers, it leveraged local IT talent – including buy-in from IU and Rose Hulman Venture, and we had remained self-financed principally because I already had other successful business and good credit.

But so far my experience has taught me that pursuing support from the local venture community is a poor investment of an entrepreneur's time. I have concluded that the resources I contacted didn't really want to deal with a business like mine. I really don't understand and it really bugs me. I'd like to know what part of the equation I just didn't get.

It seems to me that the venture resources I came into contact with only had one focus: doing money deals with venture capitalists or angels. These groups have very narrow interests as far as I'm concerned – or at least none of the ones I spoke with seemed interested. We weren't bio-tech and we didn't have obvious IP. We didn't have an exit strategy because I expected that we'd stay in the business and make money. If we lacked other critical attributes, no one told me.

Meanwhile, the FileEngine idea is successful. Without more help, it just takes longer. We continue to demonstrate the need for the product, we continue to make 50%+ margins

and employ highly paid staff. Maybe I was knocking on the wrong door? I'm developing a reseller program that should continue to exploit this obviously unmet need.

Here is a list of things I did that I believe were a waste of time:

1. Attend the Business Plan Forum
2. Present our idea at the Venture Club
3. Apply for an SBA loan
4. Compete for a presentation slot at the Venture Conference
5. Two meetings with Inception
6. Writing a business plan, over and over again
7. Hire a CPA to help with the business plan
8. Have endless meetings with banks and a CPA firm
9. Apply for a 21st Century Fund grant, twice!
10. Partners

I'm sure more wastes of time will occur to me, but I'm trying to get this done!

Here are the things I did that were useful:

1. Get Steve Beck's [of the Indiana Venture Center] input on local businesses that had a similar rental model (*basically networking.*)
2. Visit: ANTIVENTURECAPITAL.COM for insight into what I could do for myself. This would be the first place I would send someone who asked me for help today.
3. Have a web page – if it's not on the web it doesn't exist.
4. Get good legal advice
5. Deliver products to customers, make money, repeat.

Conclusions I've drawn:

1. No one cared about my idea or success as much as I did. *That's OK!*
2. You don't know where help might come from, so ask everybody. Just don't be surprised if no one helps.
3. Be very very careful about the time you spend doing anything that isn't focused on building a product and selling it to customers.
4. If you can't explain your idea in 30 seconds, you don't understand it. Very few people want to watch your home movies. :)

I'd like to think my experience might be helpful to other entrepreneurs in some way. The local 'entrepreneur helper' community, at least the resources that I contacted, turned out to be less helpful than I had hoped.

This whole experience would be completely unremarkable if not for the fact that I went into the experience with the expectation that multiple resources were anxious to take my fledgling idea and apply their energy, talent and resources to it for the benefit of the central Indiana economy and me. ☺ I believed the ads, bought their stories and fell for it. I didn't waste money, I wasted time.

I guess I'm just feeling really stupid. At 52, with multiple successful businesses and an ambition to 'do it right' this time, I found out that I should simply keep doing what I've been doing. Maybe there is a secret button I missed. But like I told the loan officer at Fifth Third after our SBA loan fell through due to a partner that backed out, I'm just not willing to waste any more time vainly pursuing help. It's time I simply started helping myself.

Aside from this rambling, there really might be a useful story to tell. And because I've receive multiple solicitations from the Venture Center lately about an agenda for the upcoming Venture Conference, I thought I might put in my bid to present on the subject of a Counter-Venture Community Perspective on Entrepreneurship. It would be a 'do it yourself and save time' view. I'd like to talk about dodging bullets, keeping the whole thing for yourself and thumbing your nose at the 'experts'.

If that isn't interesting, I'll understand and won't be offended. One of my goals when this FileEngine thing takes off is to share what I've learned with other entrepreneurs. I'm sure there's an audience for this message and I'm equally sure I can find it. There are lots of people who dream about starting a business. I'd simply like to give them an injection of reality about the value of the help they seek. Better they look inside themselves and answer the tough questions about what they can do for themselves.

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Kim J. Brand
www.fileengine.com