

Students' business strategies successful

by Josh O'Kane

Some people go to university only to get a degree and then take off to where better prospects seem to be. Others take the best job they're offered out of school and stick to it. But some people stick around, and give back to the community at large. And that can work out just as well for both parties.

Fredericton has its own series of entrepreneurs straight out of its university communities that are helping to make the city a more attractive marketplace, striking interest in both residents and travelers from abroad.

As you'll soon see, all it takes is the right amount of determination and dedication; you don't even need a business degree to take a business in the right direction.

Take the two local franchises of Booster Juice for example. Run by Rick and Laura Allen, and her brother Mike Coleman, they take something from an existing market and bring it somewhere completely new.

Mr. Allen, who has a civil engineering degree from UNB, was on business in Lethbridge, Alberta when he took note of the successful Booster Juice stores around.

According to Mrs. Allen, "he always had in mind that some day he would like to get into a franchise." This seemed to work out well. He came back, did his research, and decided that Booster Juice was the right place to start.

"He was really impressed with the franchise as a whole - the type of products that they offer, and that it's all geared towards healthy living. It's an alternative to fast food. If you want something that's good, and delicious, and is going to fill you up for the afternoon, but don't want to grab something that's bad for you - there's actually an alternative out there."

He teamed up with his brother-in-law, who has a UNB degree in Physical Education, and took up the franchise for Fredericton. Mrs. Allen, who also has a Phys. Ed. degree, joined in too.

Mr. Allen isn't a starting entrepreneur, though. He's been working in the Engineering field for quite some time, and has his own business, QES and Source Management, in that field as well.

With Mrs. Allen and Coleman's combined interest in health and physical education, and Rick's gauged interest in business, the three have made a name for themselves in the Fredericton area as a healthy fast-food alternative.

Regardless, Mrs. Allen insists her husband is the real entrepreneur of the group, and "even when he was in engineering, his goal was to be able to do his own thing."

Another active local businessman has got his hands on a synthetic ice surface that lets you play and train for hockey, or whatever you want, all year long. Jeff Andrews received his BBA from UNB in 1999, and found the surface an interesting idea after seeing it in use at hockey training camps in Ontario.

"The synthetic ice is made up of acrylics, polymers, etc. It is not plastic, and there is no plastic in the material. You can stop, start, shoot, pass and turn just the same as ice." As for how well it is being reacted to, he explains that they "have had three year-old to 50 year-old skaters on the surface. It's great for three-on-three games and tournaments."

His business, Open Ice, is at Kingswood, and is a three-on-three rink that will, in January, be hosting its first hockey competition. He's more than enthusiastic about being able to work doing something he loves, and on his own accord.

"I have always had the entrepreneurial spirit in me, he explains. "When I worked for companies

and for someone else in the past, I always felt that I wanted more, and was willing to give more, but was limited in my role."

"Large corporations have structure and people have detailed jobs to make life more simple for the structure of the company. But in my case, I always felt I could go beyond my job title and do more but was unable to. This is the motivation behind business." Andrews credits his BBA for much of his hard work abilities.

"The degree has helped in the fact of keeping organized, dealing with the accounting side, and really helped in the overall development of the business."

The only thing he didn't expect was the trip that starting a business would take him on.

"I was prepared financially, but not emotionally. It is an emotional roller coaster. One day you feel like you are going to retire at 40 and the next day you're doubting the concept and preparing for failure. It's a challenge to stay even-keeled."

Regardless, Andrews supports the idea of always sticking to your dreams - just be ready to take a risk and do some work.

He explains, "ideas are great to have, the true challenge is to take the personal risk and financial risk to do it. Make sure your business plan is sound, be organized and be prepared to work seven days a week and 16 hours per day."

"How much risk are you as an individual willing to take will determine if you have the entrepreneurial lifestyle."

Another recent entry to the Fredericton business scene is Mark Taylor, with his restaurant rating service, DiningPick.com.

As a St. Thomas student and a writer for The Daily Gleaner, he was forced to discover how much dedication it takes to run a business, and how much money it can cost when everything adds up.

"There's a lot you need to know, a lot you need to do, and quite often you have to put in long hours. Twelve hour days are not uncommon, really. There's really just a lot to know. And in addition to that, money's always a challenge. There never seems to be enough money for what you want to do," he says.

Though obviously not a business student, Taylor still credits his education there.

"What I found with STU was that I learned confidence in my abilities. It's something that I found through my education... It's one way it really helped me [in business]."

Through his company, Delora Media, DiningPick.com offers a resource for people in the Fredericton area to go to when they want to go out and eat with a specific theme, and find out what past customers have thought of the establishments.

"People don't realize as much as they should know about what's available. With cuisine, a lot of people don't realize that there's certain types of restaurants in their community," says Taylor.

"People want a place for a resource with information about what different places have to offer, and what different people think about these places. Also, he adds, "it's exposure for restaurant owners. A lot of owners have mentioned that they want more exposure, something that people can really turn to, to find exactly what they have to offer, because that doesn't exist at the present time as well."

Taylor reassures that the best way to get a business going is to research - find a need and address it.

"Do your homework - really understand and find out as much about the idea as possible. How will people be receptive to it?"

"Talk to people. See what they



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have to say about your idea. Have the desire to work hard, and work harder to take a risk. Because the two things you will need to be able to do business is to have a work ethic, and to be willing to take risks when risks need to be taken," says Taylor.

He believes that both he and his wife learned the ropes by surrounding themselves with businesspeople.

"My wife has a brother who's involved in business, my father's involved in business, so both of us have understood that those are things you really need to have in order to pursue a business."

Taylor also has faith in the power of education in bringing things together.

"There's a lot of education opportunities out there, but I don't think a lot of them are as publicized as they should be, and I think there always could be more general opportunities - information evenings, workshops or seminars that could be open to the public. There are a lot of people interested in starting a business, like myself, but aren't necessarily pursuing business degrees. They would benefit [from] something like that."

Someone who's benefited from education, and would benefit from such a website, is Naz Ali. Also known as "DJ Nasty Naz," he's the owner of Fredericton's restaurant Caribbean Flavours, and boasts an MBA from UNB.

Ali's road started off pretty bumpy. In taking an entrepreneurship class at UNB, he was required to set up a business plan for a business here in Fredericton. He started out with two plans, a restaurant and a DJ and promotions service. He decided, based on originality, to stick with only the restaurant.

The original project didn't do too well.

Ali vents, "I had this full business plan and I got a C+, which devastated the living daylight out of me."

This didn't stop him though - he was determined to prove that his Caribbean-themed restaurant could get off the ground.

"I had other business analysts, [such as people] who own Pizza Hut and Don Cherry's and that kind of thing, who Canadians are familiar with, and they told me that in two months I would fail, and that I shouldn't even start the business."

"And here it is, we've been open for a year and four months, and we still haven't failed. I've been breaking even since the first month of my operation," he says.

This is an incredible feat - especially given that it usually takes about three years for a restaurant to get off its feet and break even. That's 36 times as fast.

So what makes Ali's restaurant so popular? The answer is simple: no one else anywhere near here has done anything like it.

There's definitely nothing like it in Fredericton, or on the East Coast. The closest thing is in Toronto, and it's not even that great. It's more like 'Rasta Pasta,' like Rubbermaid chairs, and people in T-shirts and shorts; it's not fine dining at all, and that's why I decided, there's nothing like this at all, so I might as well do it here," he says.

Caribbean Flavours is the ultimate icon of overcoming adversity in the business world. Ali, a Caribbean himself, got no support from the government simply because he wasn't Canadian, and couldn't get help from financial institutions because he was only, after all, making a restaurant. But the idea of a Caribbean restaurant was, in fact, the selling point that made the whole thing work.

But making something work means putting in work yourself - and Ali more than just knows that. He and his sisters run the place, and that means seven days a week, making sure everything is just right.

On top of that, he's still a DJ. Here's an example of a Friday's adventures:

"I'm DJing at Nicky's tonight, so when I finish here at 10:00, I'll go home and get dressed, and be at Nicky [Zee]'s by 10:30, to DJ until 3:00, and then get up the next

morning and do it all again, and then DJ at the St. Thomas Formal," explains Ali.

"Work at the restaurant all day, then DJ at night, and do it all again. You have to have a lot of dedication and love for what you want to do and make it successful."

He has given presentations and lectures at UNB, encouraging people to work for what they want to make work.

"No matter what your profs say, and no matter what I say, if you have a dream, and you really want to do it, then do it. You have everyone from Steve Jobs and Bill Gates who dropped out of school and started in their basement or garage, and people like myself who are more real-life than Bill Gates, because I'm here in Fredericton. People can say you'll get a C+, and make something fail, but here it is, you can just make it work."

All it takes is a little street sense. Ali's seen the bottom of the business barrel, even washing dishes for Sodexo at one time. But little things like that add up to the knowledge it takes to be able to run a business as a whole - you've got to be able to take on whatever hands-on duties are needed. And things like time management and negotiation skills can be taught in class, but they don't help until you learn to put them into action.

Ali definitely has put his skills to use, and is reaping the rewards for it. He's already had three offers to be able to expand his business, in places such as Vancouver and Halifax. The Trailer Park Boys have stopped by, and even joked about getting him to start the business up in Sunnyvale.

"I don't know if the trailer park would love my food, but the boys did. But people like Shawn Desman, k-Os, who have had this

food before, even Alexisonfire, all those guys, want me to come to Toronto instead of Vancouver and Halifax. Even New York - I've had a couple offers come down [from people who] love the food here," he boasts.

The way he sees it, franchising is the way to go - everyone who travels from abroad want it back where they come from.

What are Ali's thoughts on the matter?

"My next spot would probably be Vancouver, or to go straight into New York, where, because of the diversity and so many people trying different things, it's a lot easier to succeed," he explains. "Whereas where you're here in Fredericton, where a lot of people don't know what jerk is, and I don't mind explaining to people, but you, as in the general public, have to be willing to learn and try something, to take those blinders out of vision, instead of being pigeonholed, so it is very difficult and hard."

"I foresee myself and my business being successful and franchising, to spread what I'm doing, what I'm all about, my values and beliefs and everything, to everybody else," says Ali.

All in all, it comes down to hard work and perseverance in getting a business to fly. Take your dreams and follow them - but make them work in the world.

Using himself as an example, Ali explains that no matter what's in the way, things will work for you in the long run. With funding, citizenship, and professionals holding him back, he made it through.

"You have to say that this thing will work, and believe in the dream and everything else, and all the clichés that go with it, and just make it work."

HIGH HOLY DAYS CELEBRATION: Sharing stories of religious traditions Hosted by the International Student Advisor's Office

You are cordially invited to the Holy Days celebration on Tuesday,
December 6th, 2005 from 12 noon to 3:30pm in the Alumni Memorial
Building Lounge.

This will be a great opportunity to meet and mingle with international students and share stories of religious traditions from around the world.

Alexander Keith's Making history in the pub nightly The Favourite Beer of UNB & STU

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Those who like it, like it a lot!

