From Passion to Profits

How a small curiosity turned into big business

by Dave Crabill

Being self employed can take on a lot of meanings. For those that have never been self employed, there is generally an expectation that the hours and pay are great. The reality is that it is a lifestyle totally different from putting in hours and getting paid. When you are self employed it means that you are always working, so working on something you are passionate about is key. Once you have found something that you are passionate about, the challenge then, is finding the profit. The long hours and little or no pay to get a business going isn't a task for the feint hearted. Aaron Hamp is a local entrepreneur who has found his passion and learned to turn a profit and

build a business.

Learning the difference between working in the business as opposed to working on the business is something that he learned through a relationship with the Michigan Small Busi-

ness and Technology Development Center (SBTDC) office at Kettering University, specifically Marsha Little. Working in the business, performing the day to day tasks, limits your ability to grow. Hamp learned that if he is to grow his business he has to focus on bigger issues such as a business plan, marketing, finance and finding a talented team.

Hamp's journey began at the age of 20 when he studied and received his license to sell health and life insurance with his father, Nick Hamp at Total Benefits Systems.

"It seemed like a decent way to make a living and had a lot of incentives for doing well," said Hamp.

Thanks to his father's guidance, he learned the art of communication through public speaking and improved his interpersonal relationship skills. During the three and a half years that Hamp worked

at Mass Mutual and AFLAC, he was introduced to computers. He found them intriguing beyond accomplishing the day to day tasks in the business, but became enamored with figuring out how things worked. Hamp's curiosity with all things computers leads him to leave the insurance industry and enroll full time at Baker College to study computer networking.

For two years Hamp studied at Baker and worked part time at a local computer store where he would fix and build desktop computers for residential customers. Not content yet, Hamp took on any challenge to fix a friend or relatives computer problem. Hamp found that the best way to come up with solutions is to find someone else on the internet that had a similar issue to see what they did to fix it. As he took on more work, the phone began to ring more often with people asking him to look at their computers and other technology items. He soon realized that he could make some money if he could fix these problems so he started out by telling people that it would be $50 if he could fix the problem but nothing if he couldn't. This worked well because he was determined to fix everything that he could get his hands on. The challenges kept coming and Hamp was enjoying the process, so it never felt like work. After he finished two years of school, he started looking for a full time position working in the computer field. He went to

a couple interviews but people kept calling to have me look at their computers.

Soon he started going into businesses to fix their computers and even started wiring new office buildings for network and phone. Again, he used the internet to look up how other people did it and improvised along the way. As the first few big jobs started coming in, he would hire buddies to come in and help pull cable or setup equipment. After successfully completing these first few jobs, he realized that he needed someone that was more permanent, someone that he could count on to be there when the work needed to be done. He put some serious thought into it and finally decided on asking a long term friend, Dan Dosh, to be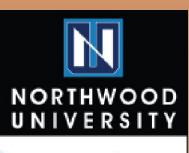come involved. He knew Dan for many years and although he didn't have much experience in computers, he was intelligent and most importantly, a quick learner. He became a partner in January of 2004 and INC Systems was born. Dan provided the seed money to pay for six months rent of a small house to get the business started. They focused on making every one of their customers happy, regardless of profit. Their work ethic and integrity paid off and they moved to offices on Miller Road in Swartz Creek after less than a year. Now they have six years of experience under their belt and the team has grown to seven.

The focus of the business has changed over the years.

"I started by saying yes to just about any work that came our way whether I knew how to do it or not; I just knew I could figure it out," said Hamp.

It was through the guidance

of Marsha Lyttle at the SBTDC that he began to understand his current way of doing business was not sustainable for the long term. Marsha took the time to meet with him on many occasions to help him get on the right track and understand the need for proper planning.

"She not only provided practical and insightful advice, she listened to my ideas and helped me put my thoughts together so I could understand how to make my ideas a reality," said Hamp. "Having the resources of the SBTDC available at such a critical time in our business is absolutely one of the reasons for our current success."

INC's current plan is to provide the best IT service and support to business with between 10 and a couple hundred computers. Currently, they manage the computer and information systems for businesses all over the state of Michigan. They are responsible for maintaining the current equipment such as server, desktops, laptops and routers, as well as helping plan and suggest projects that can help the company become more efficient and more profitable. INC becomes the IT department and provides a full blown helpdesk for their clients. INC can demonstrate that not only will their clients save money over hiring IT staff; they will also have better service.

"We have an entire team with different experiences and skills that we can provide for a fraction of the cost," said Hamp.

INC Systems still focuses on providing complete satisfaction to clients and has devised work flow solutions to assure their success. They found that by separating project work from support work they were better able to document their work and communicate with their clients without the feeling that they were chasing a moving target. By fully informing their customers of their options and explaining the procedures, they are able to set realistic expectations and avoid costly delays.

Now all project work has a clearly defined project plan that details the goals, estimates, assumptions, and expectations of both INC and the client. By defining all details ahead of time and agreeing on a plan, the desired results can be more accurately produced which creates happier clients and staff members. Support work is now defined by time to respond and time to resolve goals for issues that may come up from day to day. A client now knows that it is their goal to respond to an emergency within one hour while the goal to respond to typical support issues is four hours.

Hamp has now a refined method to create happy clients and staff. It involves education, setting realistic expectations, being truthful, and following through.

To maximize the profits and passion in a business, Hamp suggests the creation of procedures that are repeatable and scalable. Don't put your business in a position where one person or service could be the single point of failure. Build the company so that each part has a clear and direct description and desired outcome because without this you can never truly measure your growth or understand the full potential.

INC Systems has weathered the economic storm and is looking forward to a prosperous and passionate 2010!

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>
> *— Aaron Hamp, Owner of INC*