

The Case for Teenage Entrepreneurs

Competition is a funny beast.

Businesses today look for any edge they can get in today's economy and an increasing number of them are turning to young people because they are desperate to bridge the technology chasm brought about by not growing up in a world where computers are just another tool in the communications arsenal.

Ben Lang is here to help out.

Ben is one of a growing cadre of teenage entrepreneurs, sometimes called teenpreneurs, whose sometimes invisible presence is felt throughout the country and here in Westchester. Businesses as far flung as politics, to E-Bay and all sorts of other businesses are utilizing their services.

These young new businesses are not limited to the computer world, but run the gamut from tee shirt designers in the U.S. to food companies making jam in England.

The most obvious niche is in computers, from web designing to hosting sites and anything else in between.

In White Plains, presumptive Mayor Adam Bradley used a high school student to design his campaign website.

Lang, a 16-year old junior, is a successful teenpreneur and he will be sharing his story with Westchester Eye readers. Below is the first of a two-part story into what he has done to grow his business. †

What it Takes to Be a Teen-preneur

By Benjamin Lang

Picture this: A technologically-challenged 70-year-old grandfather asks his 14-year-old grandson to sell his camera equipment. How, he asked? I told him I could sell it online and that it would be easy, no problem at all.

This is how my story started. Creating an internet business couldn't have been easier.

A freshman in high school, I had never sold anything on the web before. I did, however, run a successful lemonade stand when the weather cooperated.

Young and naïve, I had no idea where to begin. I researched on the internet how to sell on eBay and took the plunge. I needed my parents' help to open an account since you have to be 18 or older.

After taking high resolution photos of the photography gear and listing all the details a buyer would want to know, I was up and running with my first eBay auction. It didn't take too long to learn there was a market for his stuff. I watched with excitement and amazement as the bids began and quickly soared. My grandfather was ecstatic about the outcome and gave me a whopping 50 percent commission. A business was born.

Motivated by my success, I wondered if there were other people, besides my own flesh and blood, who could use my help. Maybe I could sell for friends or family, or even strangers? I knew that many adults were afraid of the internet or simply didn't have time.

From there, I launched my business, selling people's used items on eBay. I started with a low commission of 20 percent to build up my customer base and spread the word to friends and family. In order to expand, however, I needed to reach a broader audience.

My first step: designing, printing and posting flyers on nearby street poles, mailboxes, cafes and bulletin boards. Next step: the internet. To promote my business, I posted free local classified ads on Craigslist, which worked very well. People emailed or called me daily. Then I built my own website.

The biggest breakthrough came when I received a call from a News12 reporter, who had seen my ads on Craigslist. She was shocked to discover I was only 15. Within one hour, she and her cameraman were in my home office interviewing me for a story on surviving the economic crisis. The two-minute interview was played repeatedly over

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the course of 24 hours. The rest is history.

Over the past two years, I've had some real high points. One of my customers brought me an ancient Atari game system that he had bought at a garage sale for \$10. After listing it on eBay it sold for \$170.

Things don't always go smoothly. I am in constant fear of a package being lost by the postal service, which has happened many times. It means dealing with unhappy customers and sometimes reimbursing them out of my pocket.

Running a business and juggling it with school is always a

challenge. I have the pressure of English papers, math tests, history projects and science homework, while sometimes having to deal with problematic customers.

Aside from the monetary rewards it's been a valuable experience for me. I learned real business skills such as: problem solving, customer service and marketing.

Next time you want to sell a used electronic online, don't hesitate to ask your child or grandchild. Who knows? It just may end up being mutually beneficial. †

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