

ANDRIJ BRYGIDYR: THE ACCIDENTAL ENTREPRENEUR

By Karen Christensen

Some people say entrepreneurs are born, not made. But ask **Andrij Brygidyr** (Executive MBA '86), and he'll tell you he never had any intention of becoming an entrepreneur — it just sort of snuck up on him.

“My goal was always to become a manager at a large corporation,” he says. Fate intervened when, only two days after graduating from the Rotman EMBA program, Andrij lost his job with a major Silicon Valley high-tech company to corporate restructuring, indicating to him “how vulnerable people are in a corporate setting.” Over the next few years he worked for a succession of entrepreneurs, giving him first-hand experience of what a startup is all about. What he found surprised him: he quite liked it.

Before long, an idea for a company began to germinate in his mind. “I kept thinking about a lecture at the Rotman School about taking old ideas and applying new product life cycles to them.” So that's what he did. “I took an old idea — merchandising — and applied it to a new market, the small office/home office market (SOHO).”

Out of the blue, Andrij got a call from a well-known major corporation. “They said to me, ‘we understand you're in the merchandising business.’ The truth was, I hadn't actually done anything yet — all I really had was this big idea. But they gave me the contract anyway!” A&A Merchandising Ltd. was born.

Andrij says his business is quite simple: “Basically, we implement clients' marketing programs at a retail level.” Andrij's goal is to make A&A the largest marketing services company in Canada, by expanding the range of services they offer and the markets they serve. “At one time we only did in-store merchandising in the SOHO market, but now we do things like point-of-sale design and production, mystery shopping, market research, and coupon rebate redemption, in various markets. We're always testing ideas and applying them in new ways, to new markets.”

Three traits that make for a successful entrepreneur, according to Andrij, are ability, ambition, and attitude. “Ability is fairly easy to obtain, assuming average intelligence, since most people learn what they need to know at school or on the job.” As for ambition, “There are many talented people out there who have lots of ability, and a strong desire to succeed, but most of them are doing jobs that they don't like. Something is stopping them from doing what they really want to do.” And attitude is key. “That means doing whatever it takes to make it work. A lot of people say they're prepared to do whatever it takes, but when it gets down to it, they won't stay up 48 hours straight, or take time away from their family.”

If someone had told Andrij that ten years after graduation he'd be running his own company, he says, “I'd have thought they were nuts.”



Large corporations aren't good at thinking entrepreneurially because the element of risk is missing, he says. “According to the Britannica, an entrepreneur is ‘one who organizes, manages, and assumes the risks of a business.’ In large corporations, they've got the first two covered, but the assumption of risk is missing. If someone messes up, the worst thing that can happen is that they might lose their job. That hardly compares to losing your house and your life savings!” Perhaps because the negative consequences aren't there, he says, the motivation isn't either. “In a large corporation, you need to provide the right ratio of risk and reward.” Pinpointing that ratio is tough, he says, “but I think this is where large companies need to focus if they want to learn to think like entrepreneurs.”

Ironically, as his company becomes more and more successful, Andrij finds himself working less and less. “I have other things in my life — my favorite is going horseback riding with my seven-year-old daughter once a week.” An active volunteer, Andrij is a mentor in the Rotman Mentorship program, and he has also been on the board of directors of Medic Alert Foundation and served as a Big Brother. He has taught “Global Marketing” in the Rotman MBA program, and has taught in the undergraduate programs at Scarborough College and Ryerson.

If someone had told Andrij that ten years after graduation he'd be running his own company, “I'd have thought they were nuts.” Nevertheless, he gets tremendous satisfaction from having built his business, and from the fact that it's international - in Canada, the U.S. and Australia. “In 1991, there was just a table, a chair, no computer — I didn't even know how to use one. Today we have 200 people in Canada, 350 in the U.S., and 35 in Australia. And we're not done yet!” **RM**