

Visionary ideas

How Tony DeCarlo implemented a plan for success at IdeaStream Consumer Products LLC **By Matt McClellan**

When Tony DeCarlo started IdeaStream Consumer Products LLC in 2002, he did it with a shoestring budget and an 18-month window. The president and CEO of IdeaStream knew that, based on simple math, he and his partners had to create a viable business in 18 months or move on to something else.

Sounds stressful, right? Now consider that the company's founders had no idea what they were going to make or sell. All they had was a business model: Be focused on the end users' wants and needs. IdeaStream would design and develop new products as trends changed, partner with manufacturers to make the products, and then market the products to retail stores.

The gamble paid off, as the company has grown its revenue to more than \$23 million in 2007.

Smart Business spoke with DeCarlo about why you need to treat the delivery guy the same way you treat your customers.

Q: How do you develop a vision?

Vision begins with passion for something. It ultimately becomes an expression of things that are core to your values, beliefs and desires — in pursuit of that passion. When you have a staunch, firm belief that's rooted in core values and you're in pursuit of something, the vision presents itself.

When we set out to create our business, we're very information-based. We're not trying to predict what tomorrow will look like as much as we're trying to understand what happened today.

If we understand what happened today, we can position ourselves best for what might come tomorrow. It goes back to the flexibility you need to build into your business model.

Q: How do you communicate your vision to employees?

The first thing that's important is you surround yourself with people who share the same core values. People don't like to be preached to or read to from manifestos. What they want is to be included in the construction of the

vision. Assuming that they're people you believe in or believe in you, you'll generally get to the same place.

You become a team of people who continually articulate and live the vision. It's important that it's simple and that it's a continuous and consistent expression of your hopes and your purpose.

Q: How do you promote that team environment?

Collaboration builds camaraderie and team. Through involvement, through a shared vision, through encouragement



and reinforcement and soliciting input, you create a sense of culture.

Every interaction with a supplier, with a customer, with a rep, with a local service provider, even with the DHL guy, you just need to demonstrate consistency in how you interact.

No matter who the person is or what part of your business they are plugged into, if you treat people consistently with the same respect, that's a big part of it.

Q: How do you get input from your management team?

There isn't a major decision we make that we don't collaborate and discuss. What makes it easy is that if you were to dissect each one of us, we share a set of core beliefs and core values as it relates to our business and our personal lives and everything in between. We're also all comfortable enough with each other to defer in areas in which we lack expertise.

If you talk about effective leadership styles, one of the most important things you can be is humble enough to say, 'I need to seek input from others.'

Obviously, I need to be a motivator, but I also need to seek motivation from my partners. We all need a pep talk every now and then. That's why collaborating with people you know and respect is so important.

Q: How do you find those business partners?

A big part of picking your partners ... is picking people and building a team that supports the type of culture you want to create and not only shares but participates in the vision that you've constructed.

A pitfall is being too slow to recognize performers in your business. The other side to that is being too slow to boot those who don't fit with the culture. You do a disservice to your internal partners in both instances.

Q: How do you recognize when someone is right for the organization?

From a leadership perspective, it's just being in tune to who's doing what in the organization. That goes back to being engaged in the business, but at the same time, you're empowering people to be leaders in their functional areas.

Assuming you're engaged and you've given people the tools they need to do their jobs effectively, you ought to be close to who's going to pinch down and who isn't. Then be quick to support those people who are, and if they're not, you try to ferret through that.

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