



# Starting Your Own High-Tech Company

By BEN CASNOCHA

## Youth no obstacle to business success

In junior high school, I had a technology teacher who forced me to memorize the text of an Apple Computer television advertisement titled “Think Different.” The last line of the ad said: “The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.” I found this message and its ambassador (my teacher) inspiring. It made me want to start a company to change the world.

But what type of company? I needed a good idea. Around the time I memorized the advertisement, I attended a professional football game in San Francisco, California. The seats at the stadium were dirty. I wanted to complain about them to the city. When I tried to register my complaint, I discovered that the city had no organized method to handle citizen contacts. In my frustration, I said to myself, “There’s got to be a better way!”

This personal experience led me to start a high-tech company that would solve the problem I had stumbled upon. I founded my company, Comcate, in 2001 with the aim of improving local government customer service. I developed software that allows cities to track, manage and resolve citizen complaints. For example, local government clients can efficiently track a citizen complaint about a pothole, a broken streetlight, a fallen tree limb, and similar problems. Not only does this lead to more satisfied citizens, but automating the tracking of tasks saves government

money. I have spent several years growing this business.

### The typical and the atypical

In some ways, my entrepreneurial journey has been typical. First, my idea came from a personal experience. Good ideas are almost always informed by first-hand experience more than brainstorming sessions inside an office building.

Second, I’ve endured successes *and* failures. Starting a company is called a roller coaster for good reason: There is much uncertainty, and each day brings its share of highs and lows, good luck and bad. Hiring the wrong employee for my company was one of my most memorable failures. My inability to judge someone’s potential fit with the company resulted in lost time and money. The best entrepreneurs have the emotional resilience to thrive in these chaotic situations.

Third, networking—constantly meeting new people—was and is a big part of every day. Each day I spend an hour thinking about who I know and how to stay in touch with these people. And who else I want to meet. Maybe these are sales leads, maybe just personal mentors. Either way, networking has been important to my personal and professional success.

In other ways, my experience has not been so typical. I started my company at 14. I’m 20 years old now. I have had to overcome challenges related to my age. I needed to convince people to take me seriously and to ignore the naysayers. I needed to learn the practical aspects of business—how to define a problem, design a solution, build a prototype and sell it—largely on my own. With few professional contacts, I needed to establish a network of advisers and supporters. And I had a work-life balance challenge: going to school and growing my company at the same time.

My youth may have also worked to my advantage. Sometimes

### For more information:

Ben Casnocha’s blog

<http://ben.casnocha.com/>

Small business planner

<http://www.sba.gov/smallbusinessplanner/index.html>

not knowing many things can help, since you ask the “dumb questions.” My lack of experience meant I had fewer biases and could approach a problem with fresh eyes.

### **U.S. policy and culture**

Fortunately, when pondering my business idea as a kid, I was growing up in the United States, a nation that offers many benefits to entrepreneurs in terms of both official government policies and an overarching culture of entrepreneurship.

The U.S. government makes it easy to start a company. There is little paperwork to complete. There is a fundamental belief in the United States that private business entrepreneurs should be afforded maximum freedom to do what they need to do to grow their business. Onerous government regulation and paperwork can stifle an entrepreneur’s creativity, and thus should be avoided. In this spirit, the government offers tax benefits to small-business owners and funds educational programs. The government believes in the power of private enterprise.

Other than providing such emergency services as police and fire protection, U.S. policy generally favors competition in an open market rather than a nationalized equivalent. The United States, then, welcomes new entrants, even young entrepreneurs.

America’s cultural attitudes are even more important to its entrepreneurial success. If you have the courage to start a business, you are celebrated and you are encouraged. You are seen as an innovator, a pioneer, a successful rebel. If you fail—and there’s a good chance you will if you start your own business—most Americans will shrug it off as a learning opportunity. There’s no shame in failing. Families, schools, and the media alike share this acceptance of failure.

In one sense, in the United States you have a permanent fresh start. Youths, in particular, are seen as beacons of innovation and creativity. As an aspiring young entrepreneur, I benefited from these attitudes. I became proud of my individuality and pursued my ideas without embarrassment.

### **No one “right” approach**

The countries that promote entrepreneurship tend to be more economically successful. Economist William Baumol has called entrepreneurship the “indispensable component” of economic growth and prosperity in the United States. With more than 16 million people employed by businesses with fewer than 10 employees, the United States truly does run on small businesses.

*Ben Casnocha outside the Comcate office in San Francisco, California.*



But the United States is not the only place that recognizes the economic importance of entrepreneurship. China, India and other nations also emphasize the importance of small business and are prospering as a result. The approach of the entrepreneurs themselves in each of these countries may vary. There is no one right path to entrepreneurial success. Rather, it’s up to the individual—you.

In the United States, the most successful entrepreneurs look different. Google, one of America’s powerhouse technology companies, was co-founded by a brainy Russian immigrant who did not care much for media attention. He earned a PhD in computer science at a top university. He studied how mathematical formulas could improve search engine results. Oracle, another powerhouse technology company, was founded by a college dropout who grew his company with aggressive sales strategies. He has become a media celebrity. All successful American entrepreneurs don’t look or act like real estate mogul Donald Trump; in fact, few do. Instead, successful business owners find the right path for themselves.

More and more people are finding a path and are finding the entrepreneurial spirit within themselves. Indeed, in the United

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States, people are experiencing a golden age of entrepreneurship. Particularly among young people—my generation—the prospect of starting your own venture has never seemed more exciting. A majority of college graduates today indicate on surveys that they plan at some point to start their own business.

### **The time is now**

This fervor to control one’s destiny isn’t limited to Americans: All over the world, people young and old are realizing the joys of creating a new business. Even if you live in an area that is not traditionally as democratic as the United States, or is not as tolerant of failure or experimentation, or has not yet established mature private capital markets, there has still never been a better time to start. The Internet has made your physical location less important. From Zambia to New Zealand, Canada to Costa Rica, you can log on to the Internet and teach yourself and connect with like-minded souls. In most cases, the entrepreneurial path begins by opening a Web browser.

So join the global entrepreneurial community. Start your own high-technology start-up. Share your lessons and experiences. Share your story. Worst case, you fail. Best case, you change the world, solve someone’s problem, maybe make a lot of money. What are you waiting for?



*Ben Casnocha is the author of My Start-Up Life: What a (Very) Young CEO Learned on His Journey Through Silicon Valley.*