

Goofing Around Yields Huge Payoff

Randy Marsden Founder, President & CEO of Madentec Ltd.

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Many people have noble stories about how they started their companies as a result of unique insight, passion, and vision. Not me. Mine was from goofing off. True, as an engineering student at the University of Alberta, I had a vision of how to help my friend who had broke his neck in a gymnastics accident. But that vision never extended to starting a company until I was playing, ironically enough, on a wheelchair ramp at the Vancouver airport.

I had traveled to Vancouver, along with a fellow student, to compete in the Western Canadian Engineering Competition for a device we designed to help our quadriplegic friend. I had loaded up a luggage cart with our equipment, which included a portable stereo, and decided to try riding the cart down a wheelchair ramp. Negligent of the fact that I had no way to steer or brake the contraption while riding it, I reached the bottom of the ramp in a spectacular crash that ended with our portable stereo smashing into the pavement. It broke.

We needed the stereo to demonstrate the audio output of our student project.

We were poor students and so were left with no other choice but to try and quickly repair the stereo ourselves (we were, after all, Electrical Engineering students). When we arrived at the University of British Columbia, we asked our hosts if they would let us into one of the electronics labs where we could go to work. They accommodated us and in no time, we got the stereo working.

Feeling good about ourselves, we walked back down the long dark hallway of the University's engineering department. As we passed one of the doors to a Professor's office, we noticed he had posted a call for papers for a conference called "RESNA" – Rehabilitation Engineering Society of North America. (We had never heard of the conference before and would not have seen the poster if we hadn't been fixing the broken stereo). The conference seemed like a perfect fit for our project. Even though the deadline had passed, we quickly wrote down the information and then proceeded on to our engineering competition (which we eventually won).

Several days later, we applied to be student presenters at the RESNA



conference. Our paper was accepted and a few months later in Montreal we were exposed for the first time to the assistive technology industry. Several companies who saw our student project offered us jobs on the spot. My fellow student accepted one of those job offers. I, on the other hand, thought to myself "if these companies think what we've done is so great, why not do it for myself...?". I declined the offers and instead started Madentec right out of University.

Madentec is now 15 years old and it has been an incredible journey. But I sometimes wonder how the journey may never have occurred if I hadn't taken a much shorter journey down that wheelchair ramp on the luggage cart. Sometimes goofing around can really pay off.

IN RETROSPECT...

"I'm just glad it'll be Clark Gable who's falling on his face not Gary Cooper."

-- Gary Cooper on his decision not to take the leading role in GONE WITH THE WIND

WISE WORDS

"Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life."
-- Confucius

WISE WORDS

"Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself."
-- George Bernard Shaw

"Don't think you are; know you are!"
-- Morpheus in the film THE MATRIX

"Wisdom begins in wonder."
-- Socrates