



Lessons from a trip to Europe

Reprinted with permission of The King County Journal, Bellevue, WA June, 2001

After a recent trip to Europe, I noticed similarities between our travel and success in business. The primary purpose of the trip was to take my dad to see where his parents grew up.

The trip was a smashing success. The highlight was going into the hills of Slovakia and finding not only the small village where my grandparents grew up and emigrated from, but to meet some cousins we had no idea were there.

On the plane ride home, I thought about all the things that had to go right to find the village and the cousins. Getting my mind back into the swing of things for business, I guess I drifted to what business lessons were present in our success. I immediately came up with five and I'm sure there are many more.

Goals and planning

First, we had a goal and a plan. Our goal was to find both the village and any remaining relatives. Keep in mind; all we had was the general area and an incorrect spelling of the village (which was not on any map, even with the correct spelling). Like in business, having a goal and a plan focused us.

Last week I had lunch with Tim Johnstone, President of Anywear Shoes in Seattle. Tim bought Anywear Shoes in 2000 and was updating me on some of the things he's accomplished. He explained how he's improved margins, expanded his sales channels, streamlined the inventory system and tightened up the financial controls. He concluded by saying, "Just like in the business plan I wrote prior to the purchase." His plan provided the roadmap to get to the next level.

Timing is everything

Like anything in life, timing can be everything. My dad, using his broken Czech, went into a gas station to ask about the village we were seeking. My mother, decades ago, had written it down as "Zbino." It's actually spelled "Zybnov."

The worker there didn't have a clue. However, another customer came in, overheard the conversation, told my dad he thought he knew what we were looking for, and drew a map of how to get there. Sometimes we create our own timing by the actions we take. The business is out there, if we only make the effort to find it.

Stu Childers' purchase of Seattle Pump and Equipment Company is a perfect example of great timing. In 1998, we looked at over 30 companies and found Seattle Pump the roundabout way. A friend of Stu's was waiting for a co-worker to finish a telephone call. She told him an old friend needed to sell their business. He knew Stu was searching because Stu let everyone know he was in the market. Two months later, the deal closed.

Don't give up

The third lesson is persistence. When we got to Zybnov, we drove around and then stopped a resident to see if he knew anyone with our name or my grandmother's maiden name. One of the first things he told us was that "almost every other house has someone with that name."

Eight people later, we met a lady whose maiden name was Martinka. After about 15 minutes of stumbling around with broken Czech, she told us to wait at her house and she'd be right back. Ten minutes later she came riding up the street on her bicycle and told us to follow her, she thought she knew some of our cousins. She was right. Persistence does pay off.



Think through your decisions

One of the keys to our success was not rushing the process. Here's an example. After meeting a couple people who were "dead-ends," we were talking to two older ladies and an older man. They spoke no English and kept rattling on in Czech, speaking so fast we had a hard time picking up any of it.

Every one of us wanted to leave. My dad was even to the point where he had resigned himself to the fact that seeing the village was going to be his only success. For some reason we never drove off. We were in the car, I even started the car, but we didn't leave. Then, the first person we talked to walked over and the old ladies started talking to him. Something must have clicked because he got on his bike and told us to follow him. That's when met the lady who knew our cousins.

Think about the good customer you were almost ready to give up on. Maybe it was that one last phone call or sending just one more letter. Perhaps it was listening a little better to hear what they wanted. As an old friend used to tell me, "Go slow to go fast."

Luck never hurts

Finally, there has to be some luck. And as the motivational speakers say, you can create your own luck. It comes from taking action. It was lucky to meet the guy in the gas station, but if we hadn't gone in it would have been impossible. If we hadn't persisted and spoke to eight people we wouldn't have been successful.

Chris Winter, technical reporter for this paper, has lived in Europe. When he first saw this story he told me, "In that part of the world, serendipity and luck have more weight attached to them -- or rather, people are more aware of the roles these factors play in our lives, as opposed to here in the 'rationalistic' West."

To put this in perspective, this village was not on any map, there were under 200 houses there and only a handful of cars. We saw no retail stores of any kind. No grocery stores, no gas stations, nothing. The nearest town with stores was well over a kilometer away. Located in the foothills of the mountains, it must be tough in the winter. The grandson of my dad's cousin spoke some English and told us he has occasional Internet access at his University, which was an hour away by car (and probably two by bus).

Compared to finding unknown relatives in that situation, the day-to-day trials of business seem pretty easy. It just takes timing, persistence, a plan and a little luck.