

'You will have mail'

A thoughtful father finds business inspiration in his love for his children, writes Jennifer Campbell.



David Ryan, shown here with daughter Zoe, calls himself a serial entrepreneur. His latest venture is a website where people post messages that can be opened at a predetermined date in the future.

Photograph by : Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen

Jennifer Campbell, The Ottawa Citizen

Published: Saturday, July 01, 2006

After his first daughter, Zoe, was born, David Ryan started carrying a journal everywhere he went. He wanted to record his thoughts so that when his daughter was older, she could see what her young father was thinking at different intervals in her life. He also invited others -- her mother, grandparents, aunts and uncles -- to write her notes in the book.

What he didn't expect, at least at the time, was that his little tribute would grow into a business idea. But many of his thoughts eventually do; he calls himself a serial entrepreneur.

Mr. Ryan, 30, has owned a Co-operators franchise for the past seven years, and he has partnerships with siblings in Xpertek Construction Inc. and Ottawa Rickshaws de l'Outaouais, a city-centre rickshaw business. His latest venture, called Electronic Time Capsule (www.electronictimecapsule.ca), is a Web system where, for \$17.50 a year, people can write and store as many notes to one person as they like, within a limit of 50 megabytes of space. An additional 50 megabytes costs \$7. Users then date-mark the note so the recipient can open it at a time only which he or she deems appropriate.

For Mr. Ryan, an electronic system saves him from dragging around his journal everywhere and allows him to release certain messages at specific times. It also saves him from worrying that his valuable book might get lost, or burned in a fire.

He remembers a friend telling him about letters from his father, who had died when the friend was 14 years old. The friend told Mr. Ryan that he has a fire-proof box in his basement with nothing in it but his father's letters.

"He told me you could take his house, burn it down, and strip him of his clothes and leave him on the sidewalk naked, but the only thing he'd really hate to lose was those letters," Mr. Ryan said.

"So I started searching on the Internet to see if my idea already existed and there wasn't anything that did exactly what I was considering, so I decided to go for it," he said.

Here's how it works: The account's owner tells the eventual recipient that the site exists and gives him or her a password and log-on. The recipient can't get into the messages until they're unlocked. Recipients can also register to get an e-mail each time a message is unlocked. The site has the capacity to store video and audio messages.

Mr. Ryan said he was particularly moved to get the business running when a couple of young adults -- one of whom was only 18 -- told him he had to do it soon because the young man was dying and wanted to write notes into the future for his parents.

"The needs of people surprised me in lots of ways," said Mr. Ryan. "But it also told me that I couldn't do this as a half-assed project. I figured if I'm responsible for delivering messages for these people 20 years down the road, I better check my stuff."

If the company folds, users will have access to their messages to either print them or back them up on a CD, he said, adding that the website has the most secure backup system he could find in Ottawa.

Less than a week after his launch, he had sold 41 accounts. One month later he was up to 50. It's a far cry from his goal of one million within three years, but he's confident that with the right marketing he will succeed. He remembers a presentation made to the Entrepreneur's Organization (he's a member of this global group of business owners, all of whom run companies that exceed \$1 million U.S. in revenue) by the Vancouver-based owner of 1-800-GOT-JUNK. He talked about his four-year trajectory from the launch of his business to his ultimate goal: an appearance on Oprah.

Mr. Ryan is working with his wife, Sylvie Lapointe Ryan, on the electronic time capsule business. He said he's the creative guy with the ideas and the dreams and she's the practical one who looks after the accounting side.

No doubt she was behind the \$16,000 they spent on a market study with two surveys, both of which came back exceeding the expectations of their business plan. For now, they're targeting mothers and grandmothers, who were the most promising customers in the analysis.

For other entrepreneurs, the veteran said his best piece of advice is to learn to delegate. "It's very hard to do as you need to delegate many, if not all, your daily tasks," he said, adding that doing that allows you to step back and look objectively at your business.

"If you are stuck in the storm of your day-to-day (work), you will not be able to do this," he said.

He said successful entrepreneurs must also know themselves and what they're good at. In his case, it's coming up with ideas, not managing the day-to-day operations.

At this early stage of the business, the jury is still out on whether it will be a success. "Only time will tell," he said with a smile.