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From Idea to Household Brand on a Budget (Or Launching a Brand without the Pork)

Anyone who's ever had a crazy business idea that gathered dust, maybe inspired into action when they hear the story of J&D Bacon Salt. Sharing a self-proclaimed mutual love of bacon, Dave Lefkow and Justin Esch, two young, regular guys working at a technology company, ditched everything to build a growing bacon-flavored empire. Against common sense odds and advice from experienced, insider professionals, they successfully launched a dry goods company for just a quarter of a percentage of the \$20 million they were advised they needed. Their \$5,000 investment is a rags to riches story that has been featured on Fox News, ABC Radio, KOMO, The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, CNET, Playboy, NPR, The Seattle Times and other media. At a recent Northwest Entrepreneur breakfast meeting Dave and Justin shared their secrets. For every entrepreneur-wannabe, the J&D Bacon Salt story provides valuable lessons for building a brand on a shoestring.

Building the Story

From the onset, Justin and Dave knew that their sea salt-based, zero calorie, zero fat, low cholesterol, Kosher-certified and vegetarian seasoning that made everything taste like bacon, was more than a salt. They were selling an entertaining story—two guys with a contagious love for bacon. They were selling a quirky vision: bacon that wouldn't kill you; bacon that you could eat often, with little consequence; bacon that you could easily add to everything. The vision and story connected with people. Justin and Dave were keen enough to recognize the connection and leveraged it in every way possible. In the process Bacon Salt evangelists emerged,

maximizing word-of-mouth marketing. Here are their tips for launching and building a brand.

Don't Forget the Little Guy

An understanding of the underdog is a common theme at Bacon Salt on multiple levels.

Executive Insights



Cheryl Isen

Seeing themselves as underdogs, Justin and Dave never forgot the other "little guys" in the business world. When trying to introduce their product to influential executives that could make or break distribution, they remembered the other little guys slaving away at their computers.

One of their tricks for getting through the gatekeeper to the executive was to send product samples to both. It built up good will and enabled them to build a relationship with the assistant that eventually help to open doors. It also helped broaden word-of-mouth.

They also played up their "oh shucks" little guy story with the big brass media to perfection. Everyone loves a fairy tale ending and winning the lottery-type stories. Justin and Dave had such a story and to their credit they never pretended to be something they weren't. They presented themselves as they were—two regular guys with a love of bacon that fueled the passion behind a great idea.

The media ate it up and keeps coming back for more.

Build Word-of-Mouth

Justin and Dave had \$5,000 to invest in their launch—a ridiculously small amount. How they leveraged their funds was pure brilliance. Even at the expense of initial product packaging, their biggest investment was focused on building an amazing website.

Then they went to work online to build crucial word-of-mouth. They launched a MySpace page and a Facebook page. They set up a blog. The Internet exposure helped Bacon Salt tap into bacon lovers around the world. Then something amazing happened. The Bacon Salt story took on a life of its own. People that tried the product sent back what the company calls love letters. The endorsements were highly personal tributes to the product. Justin and Dave quickly posted them on the website. Then video endorsements were added.

Some customers began to self-organize. The Bacon Salt Society, the Church of the Holy Bacon Salt, Bacontologists, and a Facebook group called "Bacon Salt: Because it was inevitable" emerged. The Bacon Salt evangelists were born.

Justin and Dave stayed connected with their followers through their blog, and in other ways. When an email arrived from a Bacon Salt lover—a deployed Corporal in the US Marine Corps., the company sponsored a Bacon Salt barbecue for his detachment. The gesture eventually lead to "Operation Bacon Salt", with regular company product donations shipped to soldiers around the world, that Bacon Salt customers can also contribute to.

Just Do It

Due in part to the online marketing success of Bacon Salt, it didn't take long for the media to catch wind and start their own off-line flurry of Bacon Salt exposure. However, Justin and Dave explained that the media exposure didn't just happen. It needed a little push. And the Bacon Salt guys were fearless about taking on tasks they had never done before.

One of their biggest successes came from not being afraid to pick up the phone and make calls to the media. They didn't let the lack of a public relations background stop them. They spent an average of 30 minutes of everyday pursuing the media. After a brief introduction they explained that they had a new product and why the media would want to write a story. Of

course they were ready with an interesting angle to pitch. They also picked up the phone to network like crazy.

As food industry outsiders they didn't have insider connections. So they did the next best thing. They networked up the ladder with anyone who might know someone and who might become a supporter. This included calling an old college buddy whose father worked in the dry goods business. If they couldn't find a connection they just picked up the phone to cold call.

Justin and Dave are holding on to their "just do it" attitude as they grow. One of their goals is to take product distribution to the next level. No doubt they'll pick up the phone, get in the car, hop on a plane, and just get'r done. Justin and

Dave are an inspiration. Don't forget their story the next time you have a great business idea. Take their advice and see what happens if you just do it.

These "Executive Insights" are based on monthly presentations provided by leading entrepreneurs at the Northwest Entrepreneur Network (NWEN.org), a non-profit organization dedicated to helping entrepreneurs succeed. The column is written by Cheryl Isen, founder of Isen & Company, a strategic marketing and public relations firm that helps emerging companies increase corporate visibility and brand awareness. Contact Cheryl at (425) 222-0779, Cheryl@IsenandCo.com or on the web at www.IsenandCo.com.