

Shoeless Joe, Iowa Cornfields and Surface Finishing Hyper-growth

A variation of a well-known movie quote is sound business advice, too.

I'm not sure exactly why the movie "Field of Dreams" conjures up such warm feelings in me. The mystery of a Midwest cornfield; the strong connections to the game of baseball; the deep, powerful yet melodic voice of James Earl Jones; that the Dyersville, Iowa, farm on which it was filmed belonged to the relative of a boyhood neighbor. Whatever the reason, every few years I find myself watching that movie again, being drawn to the mysterious story of a family man, his struggling farm, his deceased father and the 1919 Black Sox scandal.

"If you build it, they will come."

This quote is repeated by moviegoers, entrepreneurs and management consultants ad infinitum, the idea being that if we dare to dream, tolerate risk and build our fill-in-the-blank (bakery, retail store, auto body shop, surface finishing plant), the customers will respond in droves. All we must do is take the big step.

Forget for the moment that we all get the quote wrong; the mystifying voice that protagonist Ray Kinsella hears emanating from his cornfield actually whispers "If you build it, *he* will come." The truth is, the version replacing the word *he* with the word *they* has become part of American movie lore and lexicon.

For some entrepreneurs, this quote becomes reality; they actually manifest the business ideas ruminating in their minds and open the doors, and the customers flood in. For some. For others, the entrepreneurial battlefield is littered with the remnants of those who built it and then they didn't come.

Years ago, I moved on from the traditional version of the quote and came up with my own variation. This new iteration stemmed from several experiences wherein our teams did build it, and they did come.

Some 15 years ago, our company acquired another surface finisher. We took a chance, paid the seller and began the hard work of combining two finishing companies—the people, the company cultures and the customers—into one operation. The risk was considerable. Contract surface finishing customers have many options, and it doesn't take much for an underserved one to switch suppliers. We figured we would lose a few customers, but for the deal to work, those losses needed to be kept to a minimum. Six months later, we had not only lost very few, but the combined capabilities of the new firm induced many customers to transition even more work to us, to the point that we struggled to keep up and customer service suffered.

We had a similar experience when ELV and RoHS directives prohibited hexavalent chrome, and we were among the first to engineer an alternative process. We built it, and boy did they come, to the point that capacity was soon overwhelmed

and on-time delivery began to suffer.

Similarly, when our hook and hanger design business entered the material-handling cart space with a unique offering, demand took off at a rate much higher than our ability to service it, and we soon had more work than we could handle.

In each of these scenarios, our businesses suffered on several levels. Relationships with customers were strained, and some even found other suppliers. We pushed our people too hard in an attempt to meet demand, and the attitudes of some of our best people began to deteriorate. We stretched our equipment to its limit and forewent preventive maintenance, leading to later issues.

"If you build it, and they do come, you had better be ready." That's now my mantra whenever we launch a new product or service. We then go to work on contingency planning to ensure that, if they do come, we are ready for them.

How do you make sure your business is ready?

Employ scenario planning. How will the organization react if demand is 25 percent more than expected? 50 percent more? 250 percent more?

Devise contingency plans for people and capacity. Can we add temporary labor? Can we employ automation to ensure that our best people are used in the best way? Can we engage subcontractors? Even if subcontracting adds cost, it may be a small price to pay for keeping customers happy.

Manage the expectations of customers. Don't over-commit on delivery, especially when demand is high and customers have few other options. Customers don't like long lead times, but they have even less tolerance for missed delivery dates.

Finally, never dismiss the power of creativity and tenacity. There are times in business when we must take every advantage of strong demand and figure out solutions on the fly. A few years ago, I authored a eulogy of sorts for a good friend and mentor who had passed well before his time. In it, I noted that one of the my many life lessons attributable to him was that it is alright to go into something not quite sure how I'm going to work my way out of it, so long as I have the confidence that I will figure something out when the time comes.

With effective planning, communication, empathy, creativity and tenacity, we can meet strong demand, and our businesses can experience hyper-growth.

If you build it, and they do come, you had better be ready. ■■



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