

THE BEERMAT ENTREPRENEUR

Jonathan Priest © 2004

Company of Friends Meeting - Happy – 15th July 2004

Forget the back of a cigarette pack as the cauldron of creativity, if you've got a great business idea, what you need is a beer mat. Mike Southon, co-author of The Beermat Entrepreneur, the antidote to dotcom madness, gave CoFers his formula for business success.

96	DCA	SRAT
97	Nick	
98	Na	X
99	Steve Smith	Tom
00	Na	Naeh
01	Rachel	North + Caroline
02		$e=mc^2$

45 - Dave Currie

Trust me, I am brilliant

I have always resisted the temptation to tell people how brilliant I am. Maybe it's the traditional self-effacement of the freelancer or the fear that failure may lurk in the shadow of success. Not so Mike Southon, co-author with his best friend Chris West (who did the writing bit) of The Beermat Entrepreneur. Now, don't get me wrong, I wouldn't have embarked on this piece had it not been an uplifting presentation, but for the first ten minutes or so we were regaled with every detail of Mike's rich and varied career starting with public school through degree drop-out, theatre, jazz bands (stage name 'Gorgeous Mike Vaseline'), Unix training followed by sales, sales and more business start-ups. This un-potted history gave an insight into the unbridled psychology of the man behind 'UK's best selling business book'. His opening gambit was to ask each of us to describe a problem which he promised to solve by the end of the evening, so naturally we heard him out.

Mike has reached the enviable position of being able to say exactly what he likes. He's rich, in demand and travels the world telling his tales and having lots of fun. And he can't give a hoot what people think about him or he wouldn't have stood up in front of an audience of venture capitalists and uttered the immortal words, "All venture capitalists are bastards".

Things picked up when he got to the central thesis of The Beermat Entrepreneur. The front cover features a beer mat scrawled with the three main ingredients to start-up success:

1. Elevator pitch
2. Mentor
3. First customer

Elevator Pitch

The Elevator Pitch is your business offering in a nutshell. In particular, it must embody the cure for your customer's pain i.e. what does it do, why would you buy it? This need for succinctness was learned at the knee of Sir Campbell Fraser, a former Chairman of Dunlop and employer of a then young sales Turk in a software company. So here's one I thought up for myself, *'You talk, I write, they understand.'* "But Mr Gates, hang on..." "Doors closing..." Oh well, next time. Where can I find a really slow elevator?

Mentor

Anyway, get to work on your elevator pitch and when you have honed it to perfection, waft it under the nose of your Mentor. Mentors provide a sanity check on your big idea and are people "...with a huge experience in business, who get the point of what you're doing, who like you and whom you like." Even if your business plan was written on a beermat, you are unlikely to find your mentor down the pub. You are looking for a serious business dude, an elder statesperson of the industry you wish to invade. If you haven't got a mentor, the book gives hints on how to find one. Listen to what your mentor has to say, refine your ideas and then get him or her to introduce you to item three on the beermat, your First Customer.

First Customer

A recommendation is worth a thousand cold calls and a well chosen mentor can open doors that would otherwise remain slammed. Armed with your elevator pitch, now re-written to salve your first customer's pain, you can work on him or her to recommend you to your second customer, and so on. When the orders start to flow and you take on the mantle of employer, you'll need to know how to build a winning team. This was the subject of the second part of Mike's presentation. I liked this simple bit of advice, "Only hire people you like, fire people you don't like and don't sell to arseholes".

Entrepreneurs, Cornerstones and the Dream Team

There are three types of people in any successful organisation. At the top you have the Entrepreneur, the person who wants to change the world, (unlike the venture capitalist who only wants to make money). The entrepreneur is supported by his or her loyal Cornerstones who have expertise in say, finance or marketing. Mike classified most of us in the room as 'cornerstone types', though there was a squeal of protest from one budding entrepreneur.

Below the Cornerstones lives the Dream Team; the dedicated henchpersons, each of whom you absolutely love to bits and they all love you. The dream team will stop at nothing to make your venture a success. Just think of

Happy (Computers) and you will know exactly what I mean. Below the dream team is that cast of untouchables called Employees, the idea is to move these into the Dream Team as quickly as possible or swiftly out of the door.

Most of those present were already familiar with the Beermat Entrepreneur, some even having attended his presentations before. Tony Quinlan was sporting a well-thumbed copy of the book. I came fresh to the experience but was sufficiently impressed by Mike's brazen self confidence and his 'walk through walls' attitude to life that I sacrificed a ten pound note for my signed and generously discounted copy.

Organic Trapeze

Now to the denouement, the solution to all our problems. One chap wanted to learn better ways of networking (focus on no more than 150 contacts and work on them to extract revenue) while David, an advisor on TV commercials, was looking for an exit strategy (there isn't one, quit or work till you drop). Roger, who is just embarking on a scriptwriting course, wanted to know how his story would end (there is no way of knowing before you get there). The surprise of the evening was new CoFer Ella, a frighteningly youthful former trapeze artist and MD of a multimillion pound organic food company who was looking for someone wonderful to do her marketing (pick someone who gets on with everyone, never mind their marketing skills). And finally there was me.

Bus Pass Blues

I chose this occasion to come out. I have been harbouring a shady secret but frankly, the guilt has been getting to me. The fact is, I will shortly be eligible for a Bus Pass, a free travel voucher from the state for 'older people' – don't you love the phraseology, why not just call us old farts and be done with it. Perhaps I don't look like 59 and eleven twelfths but I just can't carry on pretending to be 40 (like who's fooling who?). Quite right said Mike at 51, your knowledge and experience will make you the perfectmentor. Problem solved! As a mentor I can now look forward to an exciting new phase in life where being an old fart is a positive advantage. Somewhere in London there's a beer mat with my name written all over it.

Find out more about beer mat entrepreneurship at
<http://beyondbricks.ecademy.com/>

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**Winner of the 2004 IVCA Gold Award
for Live Events (and Mentor)**

Buy me a beer and I'll write you an elevator pitch