

NEWS

Entrepreneur makes powerful 'Statement'

School project the genesis of Watson's advertising business

By Sayward Spooner

You've just completed two years of college at the University of Western's prestigious Richard Ivey School of Business and won the equally prestigious Robert G. Siskind award for your brilliant business plan.

What do you do?

If you're Adam Watson, you take a giant leap of faith and drop out of school.

It's not like he'd been planning on finishing school two years early. While lying awake in bed one night, Watson's eyes fell upon the blank dry-cleaning bag hanging up across the room. Whether it was fate or a complete coincidence that the bag should be hanging directly in his view on a sleepless night is inconsequential. An idea was born. An idea for a business that would turn print advertising on its head.

As he stared at the bag, Watson thought to himself, "you know what? That's a great place to put an advertisement." People send flyers out to people's homes all the time, but they just end up in your blue-box. I could print an ad on that bag and it would be forced to enter that person's home, stay in their closet." It's really as practical as it is unusual.

After winning the award for his business feasibility plan out of around two hundred second-year business students, Watson decided to make a go of it and registered his business called Statements Media, in 2005. It was only supposed to be a summer job, but things took longer than Watson had anticipated.

"I realized after the five months that I spent on it from the end of second year throughout the summer that it was going to take a little more time to develop," says Watson. That's when he decided to take a deferral on school and concentrate on his business.

"I always did well in school but I kind of wanted to get out there and see what the real world was like," says Watson. And, as I'm sure you're all aware, the real world is no picnic. Watson learned early on that he was a really small fish in a big pond. "I was twenty years old, no experience, and I was getting into the media business which is huge. It's really dominated by large corporations. It's not easier or fun competing for ad dollars amongst big companies when you're up against TV, radio, and newspapers like yourself [Business Times]." But Watson would not be discouraged so easily.

"I think if you talk to any of my clients they would comment on my persistence, my politeness. I follow up," says Watson. "I don't let them come to me, I go to them. And it takes a lot of research, it takes a lot of sitting down at night, figuring out who the companies are that would work for your medium, approaching them in a strategic manner, finding companies who are spending money at that time, who are open to innovation."

Only companies looking into innovative advertising techniques are going to be interested in paying for ads on garment bags.

Initially everyone thought Watson was nuts, including friends and family and the companies that he was making cold calls to all summer. Watson was not surprised by the reaction. "This was something that had never before been done in Canada," he explains. People were bound to be skeptical. Watson finds the difference in people's reactions from then and now amusing. It's easy to appreciate the brilliance of an idea once it is successful, but in the beginning everyone thought Watson was "nuts."

Statements Media has now worked with a wide range of companies, both large and small, and has distributed millions of dry-cleaning ad bags throughout the GTA. And it has nothing to do with luck. Watson is very aware of why his business is successful: why it works. "The people who dry-clean—it's a very niche demographic. It's upper-end, professionals, white-collar business guys," explains Watson. And it's about timing. These ads target people while they're out of their homes as active consumers in the market place. You can capture the consumers' attention while they're in spending mode. "You want to capture someone's attention when they're going to be receptive to your ad," says Watson.

But as passionate as Watson is about his business and what sets it apart from traditional forms of advertising, he insists that he's not "out to reinvent the wheel." "[Dry-cleaning bags are] never going to be the main focus for anyone's advertising campaign," says Watson matter-of-factly. They're not the new billboard or radio broadcast exactly. But their success is definite indication of where advertising is heading.

Take Watson's latest print advertising mediums: tanning salons. He is currently working on a campaign with Wrigley's gum to distribute and advertise Wrigley's whitening gum in tanning salons across Southern Ontario. And the response so far has been "amazing" according to Watson.

While Watson can now take pride in his ad campaigns with big companies like Toyota, Yogenfruz and Wrigley's and contemplate how far he's come, he's not about to forget what it took to get to this point. "There's so many barriers preventing the small guys and the young entrepreneurs from competing with these big corporate entities," he says. When approaching new companies Watson would



Adam Watson: advertising's whiz kid.

call himself a sales person or a public relations rep in the hopes that he'd be taken more seriously despite his age. Companies looking to invest are reluctant to put their faith in a business owned by a twenty-three-year-old. That's why Watson will never turn a client away, no matter how small the business or how inexperienced the owner. The costs of his ad campaigns run from a couple hundred dollars to somewhere in the tens of thousands.

It doesn't look like Watson will be returning to school anytime soon and who can blame him? He's accomplished a heck of a lot in a short period of time and at a very young age.

His dry-cleaning bags recently won an award and he's even been called to speak at Western university a couple of times to a fresh new batch of second-year business students. But if you ask Watson if he feels successful, his response is an immediate "No!". Watson has a lot more that he hopes to get done in the next few years.

This is only the beginning for Watson. In the next few years he would like to leave the world of advertising and get into more traditional forms of business. But knowing Watson, whatever he does in the future will be innovative and successful.