



Taking a view

ENTREPRENEURSHIP How a businessman rethought his product to give it a new lease of life

If you've ever had a motorcycle helmet on, you know that it's hard to see, particularly behind you. Too bad, because seeing is really useful when you ride a bike on the motorway among cars, trucks and buses at high speed.

So Marc Barros did what any normal college student in Seattle, Washington, would have done: he took his student loan money and formed a company with some classmates to put a little technology to work. They attached a video camera to the back of a bike, and connected it to a small LCD display that riders could attach to their motorcycle gas tank. Perfect rear view mirror – perfect product.

WRONG TURN

Unfortunately it didn't turn out to be the perfect business. While some serious interest among motorcycle retailers was encouraging, sales were generally slow. And a focus on learning the basics of selling retail products didn't seem to move the needle very far. Interestingly, though, Barros started seeing his customers watching their rear view LCD screens while doing something he didn't expect. They weren't using the video camera for safety, they were using it for fun – recording their friends do wheelies or competing to pull off perfect knee-dragging fast turns.



LANE CHANGE

Barros and his partners had a chance to take advantage of this surprise. But rethinking the product from the perspective of entertaining video stories, as opposed to safety, meant numerous changes. The camera needed to be 'hands-free' to operate on a motorcycle, but also wearable on the body, or other equipment, and it had to be simple to share the edited video online. With a local design firm, the team completely reinvented itself to focus on hands-free video that was easy to shoot and share online.

BUILDING SPEED

With the new VholdR camera, demand accelerated so quickly that the company had

to stop allowing pre-orders so their small team could catch up on production. The launch at the 2008 Consumer Electronics Show led to their first CES Innovation Award,

orders from around the world and a litany of new ways their customers used the camera: they strapped it to a harness to capture their rock climbing ascent, taped it to a football uniform to see games as the players see it, mounted it on goggles to ski an epic powder day.

ENTREPRENEURIAL VIEW

Barros gives us a general and a specific view, from behind the camera, of a smart entrepreneur. Generally, he shows us that new products, firms and even markets are

Look, no hands
The Contour Maphelmet video camera created by Marc Barros (below)

often not a function of vision, but instead a co-created result of working with your customers and their real needs. Specifically, he shows the potential for taking advantage of surprise, growing Contour from a dorm room production in 2003 to a booming creative consumer product company, by doing something completely different than intended, as a result of surprise.

NEXT JOURNEY

But the story doesn't end there. Barros and his team continue to innovate, delivering their first 1080px camera, their first HD camera, and their first combination of HD and GPS, all from their insight into customers' desire to simply show their friends what they do. Will their insight prove correct? Maybe, but the real question is whether Barros and his team will continue to act entrepreneurially – creating new products interactively with users and taking advantage of surprise – or whether their success will encourage them to begin trying to force their vision into the market. We'll only know when we get a chance to look in the rear view video camera. ●



details

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