INSPIRATION VERSUS PERSPIRATION: THE ROCK N BOWL STORY OF OPPORTUNITY RECOGNITION

Erich N. Brockmann, The University of New Orleans-Lakefront
Kenneth J. Lacho, The University of New Orleans-Lakefront
John Blancher, Mid City Lanes Rock N Bowl

ABSTRACT

In this article we use a case history approach on a uniquely successful business in the New Orleans, LA area to show how an entrepreneur and opportunities interact. John Blancher is the owner of Rock N Bowl which is an extremely popular entertainment combination of bowling, drinking, eating, and dancing. John led the business from virtual bankruptcy to national recognition with a strong reliance on his spiritual faith and the Invisible Hand of God. He and the business are an interesting application of entrepreneurial opportunity recognition and action.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to provide an example of an entrepreneur, John, who became very successful in what could be considered an atypical environment. Most of John's actions leading to his success didn't fall into the traditional opportunity recognition and proactive pursuit. Rather, John faced several significant environmental changes requiring reliance on his spiritual faith instead of detailed cost-benefit analysis. He was presented with several situations which turned into quite profitable opportunities without an obvious conscious effort to seek out the opportunities. Rather he refers to his inspiration as the Invisible Hand. However, John's story doesn't follow the inspiration vs. perspiration. Instead, his success resulted from the perspiration that followed the inspiration.

A good example of the perspiration vs. inspiration adage was evident in the days following Katrina flooding in New Orleans. There was a joke circulating about a devout man stranded on his rooftop amid the flooding. A Good Samaritan with a boat came by and offered the stranded man a lift; he declined claiming that the Good Lord would save him. So, the boat left to rescue others. Shortly thereafter, a Coast Guard helicopter flew overhead and lowered a rescue basket. Again, the stranded man declined the rescue claiming that the Good Lord would rescue him. So, the helicopter departed to save others. After some time, some people in a raft floated by and offered him a space on the raft; again, the man declined. Alas, too much time passed and the man died. Upon facing the Pearly Gates, the man asked why the Good Lord hadn't saved him. The Lord responded that he had sent the man a boat, a helicopter, and, a raft; but, he had failed to take advantage of any of them. This story illustrates John's situation. He was faced with many dilemmas which presented opportunities. However, he was able to recognize the opportunity and then "work his butt off" (Blancher, interview March 2013) to take advantage of them.

John is not an atypical entrepreneur. He possesses many of those characteristics normally associated with entrepreneurs: tenacity, confidence, competitiveness, self-determination, and self-efficacy (Boyd and Vozikis, 1994; Goodman, 1994). He was schooled in Education, worked as a teacher, and wanted a better life for himself and his growing family. He pursued several money making opportunities before finding his calling in a combination bowling alley/bar/dance and reception venue called Rock N Bowl.

What follows is a case history of the Mid City Lanes Rock N Bowl establishment located in New Orleans, LA. We provide a series of examples where John was tested, presented with an opportunity, and then benefited from that opportunity to the betterment of the establishment. Oftentimes, he did not consciously seek out opportunities. Rather, his spiritual faith allowed him to recognize the opportunities and then doggedly pursue them resulting in a business which has become a national icon.

We believe this article is worthwhile to the readership because it illustrates examples of traditional opportunity recognition but in a rather non-traditional environment, at least at first glance. We will show how these seemingly non-traditional applications are, in fact, excellent examples of the application of entrepreneurial attitude. The examples here should also show that opportunities are not necessarily explicit. By knowing that opportunities may be presented in a somewhat tacit nature, entrepreneurs can be open to recognizing them for what they are. And, once recognized, these opportunities can be avenues for business and/or personal success.

Concurrently, we show examples of matching a unique company to a unique environment. For instance, the cultural environment of New Orleans is somewhat different from those found elsewhere. In fact, it's one of those environments that you can't describe and simply have to experience. We will make reference to the influence of music and food in particular during our discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurship has been defined as a process activity generally involving; an opportunity; proactive individuals; risk; and, resources (Morris, Lewis & Sexton, 1994). More recently, Alvarez & Barney, (2007) have proposed a creation context where entrepreneurs decide iteratively, inductively, and use biases and heuristics. Strategies consistent with the creation context are emergent and changing with competitive advantages based on tacit learning.

Also similar to the creative context of entrepreneurship, Mintzberg (1994) has maintained that organizational strategies are mostly emergent rather than planned and they tend to be more reactive than proactive in practice. Similarly, more recent extant research has supported the recognition rather than purposeful search of opportunities (e.g., Ardichvili and Cardozo, 2000; Baron 2006)

Therefore, instead of a conscious recognition of an opportunity, sometimes the changes in one's external environment simply occur without immediate notice. The entrepreneur becomes aware, or learns, of a change and then reacts appropriately to benefit his or her organization.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through a series of interviews between the authors and Mr. Blancher, owner of Rock N Bowl. An exploratory study format was used given the unique environments under consideration (Siggelkow, 2007). Such a method is applicable to the current situation because of the lack of significant studies and because it allows for richer data (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989, 1991).

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

As with most, John's story starts with his childhood. He developed strong values based on family, spiritual faith, self-reliance, and competitiveness. From an early age, John was competitive as well as personable. He came from a home environment where spiritual faith and self-reliance were central tenets. He won every boyhood contest he entered such as those for selling the most raffle tickets. He always wanted to win and often did. He was quite adept at convincing people to buy what he was selling. His competiveness naturally led him into sports and he played baseball in high school. These characteristics are all invaluable to an entrepreneur (Goodman, 1994; McNerney, 1994).

John's athletic abilities resulted in a baseball scholarship at a local university. He earned a Bachelor Degree in Education and taught school after graduation. However, he soon recognized that he was not earning enough to support his growing family—consisting of a wife, son, and daughter. John therefore decided to pursue a Master Degree in School Administration. After earning his degree, he returned to teaching school and coaching baseball. Still, he was unsatisfied with the income available by working in education. John decided to pursue money earning avenues where he had been successful in the past.

TRANSITION FROM EMPLOYEE TO ENTREPRENEUR

Motivated by a need for more income than was available in the education field, John returned to his boyhood neighborhood. He recognized several opportunities where he could be

more proactive in affecting his level income. He would work in occupations where he was knowledgeable and where successful work would pay off in higher income (e.g., sales).
John's decision to leave his position as a salaried school teacher placed his financial security at risk. He relied on his personality and his spiritual faith that he could earn more under his own control than he could though working for someone else. He was building on his personal strengths of self-reliance, self-determination, extroversion, and competitiveness. He leveraged his strengths of outgoing personality, knowledge of neighborhood, and previous personal selling successes (e.g., the raffle sales). John's faith inspired him to then use his perspiration to earn more money.

Just to illustrate the magnitude of John's efforts, he worked with his wife's cousin's crawfish business, as a caterer for wedding and other receptions. There were times where John would be delivering crawfish in his tuxedo because he didn't have the time to change clothes between jobs. In his spare time, John was self-taught in the areas of real estate and insurance. He earned the requisite licenses and worked those areas in addition to the current jobs. A theme to all of these pursuits is the personal interactions necessary between the seller and the buyer. John excelled in such pursuits. He was able to match his personality traits to those necessary in his external environmental.

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES

Although the work load may seem onerous, John considered himself in a fairly good position. He was making enough money to support his family which was his previous motivation. Furthermore, John knew that if he needed more money, he could simply work more and what his was doing because of the nature of the jobs he was working. However, changes in the world economy were about to make financial success more difficult.

In the 1980s, falling oil prices negatively affected many of the businesses in the New Orleans area. Much of the New Orleans economy relied on the oil and gas industries. Therefore, jobs were lost as many of the oil and gas companies consolidated their operations into their respective headquarters in the Houston area. During this economic downturn, John's father lost his job. Because of John's tight family, and his belief that as the eldest son, the onus was on him, he took on the financial responsibility for his extended family. John was finding that there were not enough hours in a day for him to work sufficiently to support everyone who was now depending on him. He was now open to the thought of other opportunities; but, wasn't yet consciously pursuing them.

SPIRITUAL FAITH REINFORCED

About this time when financial outlooks were looking pretty poor, John's spiritual faith and motivation received reinforcement. John had been hearing reports of apparitions of the

Virgin Mary in Medugorje, Yugoslavia (now Bosnia Herzegovina). It took John a couple years before he could arrange a visit. But, afterwards, John knew that a new opportunity would present itself for his and his family's financial security. John's faith opened his mind to recognize opportunities. In a casual passing a friend told him about a bowling alley that was for sale. John recognized this new knowledge for was it was, an opportunity. He then shifted from inspiration to perspiration and pursued this opportunities to ultimately find success with Rock N Bowl.

INITIAL OPPORTUNITY TO BUY BOWLING ALLEY

Shortly after John's return from Yugoslavia a friend, a CPA, informed him about a bowling alley for sale, The Mid-City Lanes. John knew of the business because he had played on the stairs leading to the business as a boy. This was an unusual location for a bowling alley. It was on the second floor of a strip mall shopping center. The only access was via stairs which presented logistical problems for deliveries and maintenance.

The business was currently owned by the Knights of Columbus who owned the equipment and leased the space. They were not really interested in running the bowling alley and therefore, were letting the lanes and equipment deteriorate.

John was able to see past the problems. He remembered the place as always being busy when he played in the area as a child. Furthermore, instead of a deteriorating bowling alley, he saw a catering hall with a bar and bowling alley instead of just a bowling alley albeit one in need of serious attention.

NO ONE ELSE SAW AN OPPORTUNITY

Even though John saw the opportunity in Mid-City Lanes, he could not convince anyone else that the business could be viable. In fact, all of his friends and family members thought John was crazy. The business was deteriorating as was the equipment. The equipment was dated and everything was on the second floor with access through stair only. It was located in a low income neighborhood with inadequate parking. However, John's faith opened him to the opportunity and belief that with lots of his own sweat equity, the Mid-City Lanes would be the answer to his prayers for financial security.

RECOGNIZING OPPORTUNITY

When John looked at the Mid-City Lanes, he didn't see a bowling alley. Instead, he accessed his earlier experience in catering and envisioned a reception venue for parties. However, instead of people just standing around in a big non-descript hall, they could have the opportunity to bowl should they desire. John's faith allowed him to open up to the tacit recognition or vision for a new business venture (Brockmann, 2008; Brockmann and Anthony, 2002). But, first John had to purchase and then renovate the place sufficiently to attract customers and revenue.

John bought the business for almost nothing. He paid $1,000 down and financed another $9,000 for ten years. The Knights of Columbus constrained financially by the lease. The owners of the building required that the premises be returned in a "Broom Swept Clean" condition if the lease was broken or not renewed. This meant that all of the bowling alley equipment had to be removed at a cost of nearly $50,000. Since the Knights of Columbus were not interested in the business at all, they were happy to sell the business to John for what appeared very favorable financial terms.

Even though John saw a catering hall that was also a bowling alley, he started out with trying to make money from the bowling business. This choice was mostly out of necessity because there wasn't much else present and John lacked any capital for improvements. But, once again, John leveraged his personal attributes. As when he left teaching, John was going to "work his butt off" (Blancher, interview March 2013). He was also able to recruit family members to help, especially his father, because most were currently out of work.
John mortgaged his house in order to install a kitchen—displaying another attribute of entrepreneurs. He got the place cleaned up and used his sociability to enhance every customer's experience. He personally greeted every customer and shook his or her hand upon arrival. The problem was lack of customers and therefore revenue.

BRUSH WITH BANKRUPTCY

Even with the relatively friendly financing terms, John was having a trouble attracting enough customers to simply cover expenses. After only two months of operations, John was unsure if he would be able to make payroll. He had already tapped all the traditional sources of capital available to entrepreneurs (e.g., mortgaging his house to install the kitchen). Once again, in this time of despair, John returned to his faith and simply believed that something would turn up because it just had to. In actuality, John was opening his mind to allow the recognition of new opportunities.

EMERGENT OPPORTUNITIES

Akin to Mintzberg's (1994) emergent strategies, a couple of opportunities presented themselves and then John's tenacity kicked in and he pursued them. A local newspaper writer did a story on uniquely New Orleans businesses. John interested the writer because he was a local boy with a unique business—a bowling alley on the second floor of a strip mall. After the article was published, the next weekend, attendance went up by a factor of ten. The next month a local television personality wanted to do a public interest show on the business. With little effort, more people were aware of John's business. But, it still wasn't enough for success. John had to leverage his new customers into more business. He did so through his personal drive and energy. He continued to personally greet everyone as they entered and thank them for coming. It was as if the customers developed a personal relationship with John and they told their friends about it.

About this same time, another environmental change was occurring, the holiday season. The holiday season in New Orleans varies somewhat from those in other geographic areas. People start having holiday parties before Thanksgiving and the parties continue through Mardi Gras/Ash Wednesday. Therefore, instead of a four to six week party season from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day, in New Orleans, the demand for party venues often lasts twice that long.

Thus, John's personal attention to each customer was garnering him great positive publicity for his unique venue just as the demand for party venues was beginning to increase. These parties would become John's main source of income in the very near future. They were also fulfilling Johns' original vision for the business. That is, John knew from the time of purchase that the business wouldn't be a bowling alley. Rather, John envisioned a venue where people could have catered parties and bowl. After the party ended, these same people would remain and spend more of their own money bowling and drinking. The next, and ultimate, transformation of the business would be the addition of musical entertainment—another opportunity.

ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY AND ULTIMATE BUSINESS TRANSITION

Separate from the success from the parties he was now booking, John noticed a group of customers that regularly showed up after theater on Saturday nights. In his outgoing manner, John tried to take advantage of this opportunity by offering the group hors d'oeuvres. He expanded his offerings to include a juke box; this was the birth of the Rock N Bowl. When John noticed the interest in music, he decided to expand the offering to live music one night a week.

As introduced earlier, a uniquely New Orleans environmental aspect is the prevalence of music. There are many more bands available than there are venues at which they can perform. Therefore, a lot of bands are looking for exposure and are willing to play for a percentage of the cover charge. This translates into little risk for the business because there is little out-of-pocket or up-front expense.

Thus, John began to offer live music on Friday nights and the party-bowling-drinking-dancing-music combination clicked and became an overnight sensation. And, because of John's personal efforts in greeting everyone coupled with the close knit nature of the music business in the New Orleans area, word of mouth advertising continued to spread. This impromptu communication became another source of publicity akin to that garnered earlier. Word soon spread that John's place was the "hot" place to be for movie stars and other celebrities.

Building on the success of the live music, John expanded the offering to feature a local style of music on Thursday nights—Zydeco. Zydeco is a combination of the local Louisiana cultures; it focuses on Cajun and Creole but incorporates aspects from many other genres. Again, John's decision proved successful because he had filled what had been a void in the music scene of New Orleans. John's emergent strategy had resulted in an ideal definition for his business. Customers would come for company sponsored parties where they could bowl in the early evening and then afterwards they could drink, dance and bowl late into the night. Mid-City Lanes had become Rock N Bowl.

ROCK N BOWL BECOMES A NATIONAL ICON THROUGH MORE PUBLICITY OPPORTUNITIES

Although his Rock N Bowl Mid City Lanes business was now viable, John wasn't where he wanted to be financially, yet. John was still much of a one man show as evidenced by his greeting everyone. If an employee didn't show up, John would often have to fill in. On one such night when John was tending bar, a customer ordered an Alligator sandwich. Even though the option was on the menu, John recognized that the selection was unusual and assumed the patron was not local. Once again, in his outgoing manner, John began talking to this customer about the Rock N Bowl business. The customer was in town researching New Orleans for an upcoming article in The National Geographic Magazine. When the article about New Orleans appeared in a 1995 issue in the magazine, John's Mid-City Lanes, Rock N Bowl figured predominately.

From 1995 on the publicity became nationwide and was nearly nonstop with articles in USA Today, CNN, Rolling Stone magazine, and the NBC Today Show just to name a few. John's business was now a national phenomenon. Bands continued to pursue him for an opportunity to play, party planners called him such that advertising/marketing wasn't necessary, and the business was providing satisfactory employment for most of John's family members—both immediate and extended.

CONCLUSIONS

The uniqueness of Rock N Bowl is immediately recognized whenever one visits the establishment. Few places exist where one can find a bowling alley on the second floor of a strip mall. Fewer still are able to combine the bowling experience with the local food and music which further enhances the uniquity of the business. Music and food are the soul of the New Orleans environment; they are the foundation of the Tourism industry (Shuler, 2013).

John has become very successful with his unique business being conducted in a unique environment. He has done so with a somewhat unique approach to business. John's spiritual faith is displayed clearly in his actions. Instead of a traditional approach of seeking out opportunities, John relies heavily on his spiritual faith. He often refers to the Invisible Hand of

God when explaining why opportunities happened or why he decided on a course of action. However, this is not blind faith and is congruent with the reactive approach (Mintzberg, 1994) and opportunity verification (Baron, 2004). For instance, John acknowledges that it was faith that led him to the Mid-City Lanes originally. However, it was his previous work experience in catering that allowed him to recognize the business potential of the venue from a holistic perspective.

John's model may not work in other cities lacking a similar food and music culture base. For instance, he benefited greatly by having bands wanting to play his venue. In New Orleans there are many more bands than there are venues. Therefore, once John started offering live music, he was able to book bands without much trouble or expense. Then, as the business became more popular and successful, the quality of the bands would also improve. Because of the tight knit community of musicians, John's venue quickly became very well-known through word of mouth.

John relied almost exclusively on word of mouth advertising; this was mostly because of lack of resources to afford commercial marketing. Such reliance started from his purchase when John would personally greet every customer and shake his or her hand. Afterwards, he rarely used traditional marketing venues. At first this is because he just didn't have the money necessary. As time progressed, he received so much publicity and he just didn't need any addition exposure. He did make one television commercial with virtually free music from the public domain. He then wrote the words himself and has never changed it. His commercial is currently the longest running unaltered commercial on television. Such business actions display John's balance between relying on his spiritual faith while making conscious and rational cost-benefit decisions. He seems to have found a formula that works—at least in the current environment.

FURTHER RESEARCH

There is still some disagreement in the definition of opportunity (e.g., Baron, 2004) and a lack of extant research in opportunity recognition by entrepreneurs (Ireland, 2007). Even the separation of entrepreneurs and small business proprietors lacks clarity and needs better delineation (e.g., Sonfield, 2008). Because of these lacks, there is an obvious need for any research into the relationship between opportunities and entrepreneurs.

Another avenue of future research could be on the fit between the business and special characteristics of the local environment. Obviously, New Orleans isn't the only city with a unique blend of factors; other cities have their own takes on music, food, or other characteristics. An obvious extension of this topic would be to see how or if John's model works in these other environments. This is something that John is currently struggling to decide for himself.

EPILOGUE:

While the Rock N Bowl business continued to grow, John knew that he needed something bigger to support three families. John purchased an iconic restaurant, Ye Olde College Inn, a few blocks away for his son and son-in-law to manage.

Based on a combination of factors, including Hurricane Katrina, John ended up moving the bowling alley into a structure next to the restaurant he just bought. He was able to retain much of the character of the original venue except for being on the second floor—he was now ground level. The change has not seemed to dampen the popularity of the business.

John continued to rely heavily on his faith in guiding his actions. He faced the ordeals of opening a new restaurant business, surviving Hurricane Katrina and the resultant flooding of the city, and moving the bowling business to the new location. One final observation is that John became more proactive in relying on his faith by placing a statue of St. Joseph on the wall of property he intended to buy—it worked.

The businesses are all successes. Currently, John is exploring the option of opening another Rock N Bowl type business or franchising. However, he is leery that the model will work in other environments without the unique aspects of New Orleans that have allowed him to be so successful.

REFERENCES

Alvarez, S.A. and Barney, J.B. (2007). Discovery and creation: Alternative theories of entrepreneurial action. *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal.* 1: 11-26.

Ardichvili, A. and Cardozo, R.N. (2000). A model of the entrepreneurial opportunity recognition process. *Journal of enterprising culture.* 8: 2.

Baron, R.A. (2004). Opportunity recognition: A cognitive perspective. *Academy of Management Proceedings:* A1.

Baron, R.A. (2006). Opportunity recognition as pattern recognition: How entrepreneurs "connect the dots" to identify new business opportunities. *The Academy of Management Perspectives.* 20: 1 104-119.

Boyd, N.G. and Vozikis, G.S. (1994). The influence of self-efficacy on the development of the entrepreneur. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice.* Summer, 63.

Brockmann, E. N. (2008). Using More of Your Existing Knowledge to Make Better Strategic Decisions. International Journal of Learning and Change. 3(2): 145-162.

Brockmann, E. N. & Anthony, W. P. (2002). Tacit Knowledge and Strategic Decision Making. Group and Organization Management. 27: 436-455.

Cyert, R.M., Dill, W.R., March, J.G. (1958). The role of expectations in business decision making. *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Dec. 3: 3, p307-340.

Eisenhardt, K.M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review* 14: 532–50.

Eisenhardt, K.M. (1991). Better stories and better constructs: The case for rigor and comparative logic. *Academy of Management Review*. 16: 620–7.

Eisenhardt, K.M. and Graebner, M.E. (2007). Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges. *Academy of Management Journal.* 50: 25–32

Goodman, J.P. (1994). What makes an entrepreneur. *Inc.*, October, 29.

Ireland, R.D. (2007). Moderator comments: Strategy vs. Entrepreneurship. *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal.* 1: 7-10.

McNerney, D.J. (1994). Truths and falsehoods about entrepreneurs. HRFOCUS, August 1994, 7.

Mintzberg, H. (1994). The rise and fall of strategic planning. New York, The Free Press.

Morris, M., Lewis, P.S., and Sexton, D.L. (1994). Re-conceptualizing Entrepreneurship: An Input-Output Perspective. *Advanced Management Journal*, Winter 1994, 21.

Shuler, M. (2013). Tourism campaign focuses on music. *The Advocate.* Retrieved February 14, 2013 from http://theadvocate.com/news/5179507-123/tourism-campaign-focuses-on-music.

Siggelkow, N. (2007). Persuasion with case studies. *Academy of Management Journal.* 50: 20–4.

Sonfield, M.C. (2008). SBI consulting: "Small business" versus "entrepreneurial " performance outcomes. *Small Business Institute Journal*. 1: 62-72.