

Building a company takes time

I tend to rush. When I have an idea, I can't wait to spill my guts on paper. In fact, it pains me to be methodical when I write.

Whatever the reason, I've learned that planning my copy is worth the pain. Startup businesses, too, should check their eagerness at the door and make calculated, thoughtful decisions.

Local startup InEnTec learned the value of patience and planning on its journey to becoming a "15-year overnight success," according to CEO Jeff Surma.

InEnTec's flagship technology is a plasma enhanced melter. This melter uses plasma — electrically charged gas — to break apart materials, transforming the organic parts into synthetic gas. Synthetic gas is used to make products such as transportation fuels. So, quite literally, InEnTec's melters convert trash into treasure.

Surma recently spoke at a Three Rivers Entrepreneurial Network meeting, sharing the history of his company and advice for other entrepreneurs. His advice:

- ▶ Staff up gradually so you don't have to staff down hastily.
- ▶ Never sell your technology-based product to an organization that isn't sufficiently capitalized.
- ▶ Seek a contract to operate your product once you sell it.
- ▶ Everything you think won't happen, will.

Staffing

Just two years after Jeff and his partners formed InEnTec, they hired rapidly because they anticipated a surge of business.

"In retrospect," said Surma, "it was a mistake to staff up that quickly because we ran into issues that we didn't expect and we needed money that was going toward new salaries. So, we had to lay off people."

The lesson here is to hire people as your business grows. Don't hire merely because you

expect growth. It could be a ways off.

Seller beware

Ensuring your product's buyer is sufficiently capitalized goes hand-in-hand with demanding a contract to operate the technology upon sale.

A company purchased one of InEnTec's plasma enhanced melters. Unfortunately, the company could afford only to buy it, not maintain it. As one of its first sales, InEnTec was eager to preserve the technology's reputation, so it coughed up time and money for necessary maintenance and repairs that were not under contract.

Had InEnTec demanded an operations contract in addition to the sale, it would have either been compensated for the maintenance costs or the buyer would have backed out of the purchase. In hindsight, not selling the melter to that company may have been a better option for InEnTec, but like many new companies, it was eager for a sale.

Expect the unexpected

Surma estimates that unexpected issues, including a few lawsuits, set InEnTec back at least five years. Its business model also changed over time as Surma and his employees perfected the melters and found their niche in the industry.

Even with these setbacks, Surma proudly announced that InEnTec recently inked a deal with Waste Management to turn garbage into gas. It's a huge step for the Tri-Cities-based start-up.

InEnTec expects to expand its technical staff in Richland over the next few years to support the new joint venture. And fortunately for us, InEnTec is willing to share the lessons it has learned so that other start-ups may have overnight success, in fewer than 15 years.

To learn more about InEnTec, go to www.InEnTec.com.

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