

Whom does entrepreneurship benefit most? Bill Gates? Michael Dell? Sure, these and other celebrity entrepreneurs have reaped gains from the businesses they started, but they represent only the tiniest fraction of the millions of people starting businesses around the world every year. The overwhelming bulk of entrepreneurs today aren't particularly interested in becoming celebrities and gracing the covers of *Fortune* or *BusinessWeek*. They are simply trying to make a living by their own wits.

dian tribes. It seems my entrepreneurial message to the Yavapai-Apache Nation in Arizona has been taking root. The types of businesses being started by the first round of graduates are about as basic as it gets. Here's a sampling:

Travel agency. The idea for this business, which a clever first-time entrepreneur came up with, was a no-brainer. The woman who conceived it currently works for the tribe and knew that the husband-wife team running the off-reservation, non-tribal agency that handled all the tribe's travel for years (business travel as

win for the entire tribal economy to buy services from members versus outside suppliers.

Large-vehicle customization. The closest competitors to this business start-up are in Phoenix, two hours to the south. This means that all of the mid- and northern Arizona owners of oversized vehicles—of which there are tens of thousands in the largely rural area—are potential customers. The stroke of native genius by the father-son entrepreneurial team that originated this idea was to seek out and become the exclusive

Words Into Action

BY LARRY FARRELL



American Indians are putting my advice to practical use.

Most of the thousands of people I've met over the years don't even call themselves entrepreneurs, nor do they think of themselves as being part of the latest, hottest genre of business. Rather, they see themselves as putting food on the table by doing something they like to do and are pretty good at doing. In short, those who truly benefit most from entrepreneurship can be found on the lowest rungs of society's ladder. It's something I've said repeatedly. But while words are one thing, deeds are another.

I recently saw the nuts-and-bolts nature of the run-of-the-mill entrepreneur vividly reinforced through our economic-development projects with American In-

well as large tours every year for tribal elders) had just retired and closed the business. So she partnered with her niece, who just happened to be a certified travel agent, and got the tribe's agreement to give her a chance to handle all tribal travel.

Her future vision includes not just booking arrangements for tribe members but also expanding to the upscale markets of nearby Sedona and Prescott, where she will promote tours to Israel. This second-phase strategy comes from her personal passion for religious history, greatly enhanced by her master's degree in religion from an Israeli university. Besides being a no-brainer because it's a virtual monopoly start-up, it's a win-

local distributor for a large, experienced shop in Phoenix. While the son is currently employed as a master auto-body repairman, the Phoenix-based firm will further train the owners and their future employees in the specialized area of customizing large, desert-terrain vehicles. Even more importantly, because the firm in Phoenix is an exclusive distributor of a large Japanese maker of wheel and body products for oversized vehicles, the start-up business on the reservation will become a sub-supplier of the same world-class product line.

Woodcutting. A young, experienced forester is setting up a woodcutting business to supply both the tribe and the

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entrepreneur

surrounding region with firewood. All he needs is a good truck and good saws, and he will be in business—doing exactly what he currently does as an employee for another company. His competitive advantage will be twofold: First, he will be, on day one, the area's lowest-cost supplier; second, the tribe will be a guaranteed customer of approximately half his output. Another entrepreneurial no-brainer!

Pawnshop. There happens to be, for better or worse, an active market within American Indian nations for pawnshops. However, it can be a rough-and-tumble business, handling firearms and often being presented with stolen goods. Fortunately, the entrepreneur hopeful who decided to open his own shop is amply equipped to handle the responsibility. At his day job, he's a bailiff of the tribal courts and therefore has experience dealing with weapons, as well as some pretty ornery people. Interestingly, he had been considering this business idea for five years, ever since he had to pawn some jewelry himself and saw the high profit margins possible in the business. He also discovered that the closest pawnshop to the reservation was an hour away, in Prescott. He made it his business to become friends with the proprietors, so that as part of his start-up plan, his working relationship with them will teach him the business—especially the critical art of valuing pawned items—for a small percentage commission on his first three years of sales.

Indian arts and crafts. The young woman starting this business comes from a family with a long history of making American Indian arts and crafts: jewelry, dolls, baskets, and so on. Her twenty-first-century idea is to use her widespread family of artisans as suppliers and to establish both a retail tourist store on the reservation (right in front of the tribe's large and thriving casino), as well as an Internet site selling her authentic Yavapai-Apache arts and crafts—direct from the reservation to the whole world.

Bail bondsman. The correct name of this business should be “bail bonds-

woman.” The tribal woman starting this venture has been a longtime employee of the tribal judicial system, and in that capacity, she has seen firsthand how difficult it is for arrested Yavapai-Apaches to make bail. It's even difficult for the families to visit them while they await trial, since all tribal members are held 240 miles away in Gallup, N.M.—because no jail around the reservation has room for them. The closest competitors are in Flagstaff to the north and Prescott to the south, and neither of these bail businesses is keen to get involved with Indians' legally sovereign court systems. This will likely remain a small business, but once again, it's a win-win for the tribal economy to keep as much economic activity as possible within the family.

TV documentary production. The start-up enterpriser for this concept is a high-energy, creative Apache with years of experience working for others as a cameraman and editor of videos and films. He recognized that Arizona had no TV shows on the history and current activities of the state's Indians, so he wrangled a letter of intent from a large and respected Phoenix-based cable channel for a thirty-minute weekly show. He's on fire with enthusiasm about this business, and if successful within the state, he hopes to expand the model across the country.

Sporting-goods store. The proprietor of this venture is a well-known athlete in the region; he played high-school and college basketball and football and has stayed active in the regional sports scene as a coach. What he and his business-partner wife realized over the years is that to buy a pair of sneakers, or a football, or a set of quality golf clubs, residents and tourists have to drive to Flagstaff or Prescott. In the entire Verde Valley of Arizona, a booming growth market of 100,000 residents with another 100,000 tourists each year, there's not a single sporting-goods store. The business plan is to open a retail store in the region's residential center; extend and support it with sports clinics for young,

local athletes and their coaches; and finally open a more upscale store in Sedona for tourist fishers, golfers, hikers, and hunters. This start-up has three great advantages going for it: First, there's not a competitor in sight. Second, the athlete-entrepreneur has instant access to, and credibility with, every school athletic department across the region, which is crucial to creating highly profitable ongoing commercial accounts. And third, his wife is prepared to follow my standard advice of not giving up her (highly paid) day job as a dealer at the tribe's casino—at least not until the first store is up and running.

The fact of the matter is, none of these product/market choices is surprising. These American Indian entrepreneur hopefuls, who have diligently gone through a complete entrepreneur-development process, are simply using the criteria that they were taught to use in picking their start-up products and markets. They were told, over and over again, that whatever business they chose to start, it absolutely had to effectively answer three critical questions:

- 1) What do you love to do?
- 2) What are you good at doing?
- 3) What unmet needs do you see in the marketplace?

The participants were told that their success as first-time entrepreneurs would be enhanced ten times over if they could come up with a business idea that satisfactorily answered all three questions—and that's exactly what they did or are doing.

When working on the Yavapai-Apache reservation, reviewing such start-up plans, and meeting face to face with these future entrepreneurs, I realize I'm a million miles away from the famous individuals whom I've interviewed and written about over the past twenty-five years. It's a good feeling, actually, because it brings me back down to earth as to what entrepreneurship is really all about: Anyone can do it, as long as you've got a smart idea that meets the three criteria and you are willing to work hard. Entrepreneurship is the ultimate meritocracy. ☪