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How to land the first big client

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By Nancy Crotti

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Ben VandenWymelenberg, Woodchuck Case owner and CEO, demonstrated a laser cutting and engraving machine used at the company's St. Louis Park facility. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

Ben VandenWymelenberg never took a business course in college. Yet within two years of starting a company, he and his partner have their wooden cases for cellphones, tablets, laptops and headphones in 1,500 Target stores across the nation.

How did they and other small businesses land big clients? That was the topic of a recent Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce Small Business University event.

VandenWymelenberg, 23, grew up in a wooded area south of Green Bay, Wis. He combined his love of nature with his dual majors of architecture and landscape architecture at the University of Minnesota's School of Architecture to come up with what would become his Minneapolis-based company, Woodchuck Case.

"I was drinking a beer about 2 a.m. in the [university] architecture studio and thought, 'This is kind of cool. I'm going to slap some wood on my phone,' " he said.

He started making wooden cellphone cases for friends and enlisted fellow architecture student Kevin Groejes to help sell them. They began peddling their products door-to-door to stores, including the University of Minnesota Bookstore on the Twin Cities campus.

The bookstore's technology buyer turned them down, saying students didn't understand what the bookstore had to offer, VandenWymelenberg said. He and Groejes promised to return after they got the store some publicity. They landed a story in the Minnesota Daily student newspaper, and Woodchuck cases landed in the U of M bookstore.



A wooden iPad Mini skin is one of the products designed and manufactured by Woodchuck Case in the Twin Cities.
(Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

“We’re dedicated to helping him, and not just to selling our product,” he said.

The partners started selling to other college bookstores, but quickly learned these would not be their best outlets.

“The college kids were using their money to buy beer, not Woodchucks,” said Groejes, 24, who offered this advice: “You can really get stuck on being afraid to change. Hold onto your core values but be ready to shift. A lot of times, you will be rewarded quickly if you change quickly.”

The partners decided to aim high, at Target, Best Buy and Apple. Best Buy and Target rejected Woodchuck half a dozen times before agreeing to sell its products, which are designed, manufactured and assembled in the Twin Cities. They’re still working on Apple.

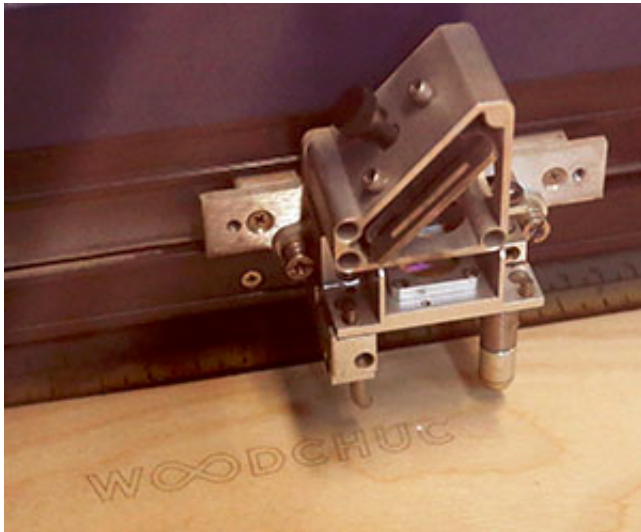
Speed Commerce (formerly Navarre Corp.), an e-commerce distributor, agreed to take on the Woodchuck line last April. Woodchuck also was a semifinalist in the Minnesota Cup this year.

“For us, it was a process of literally meeting the right people,” VandenWymelenberg said. He and Groejes met a Target buyer at a party in Las Vegas.

“Just ask and ask and ask, find the best people in the business, go to them, pick their brain,” VandenWymelenberg said. “If you don’t partner with them, at least you learn something.”

‘One bite at a time’

At the recent small-business panel, Ed Stogenson, general manager of the Siemens Building Technologies Division in Vadnais Heights, advised small businesses to go after big clients like his company “one bite at a time.”



Woodchuck Case’s cutting and engraving machine.
(Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

“If you’re going to a Fortune 500 company, don’t try to go for the CEO,” he said. “The odds of that are slim to none, unless you’re sitting at a bar in Vegas.”

He urged attendees to find their intended customer’s version of Radar O’Reilly, the unassuming go-to guy who kept the field hospital afloat on the television show “M.A.S.H.”

Stogenson said corporate buyers want to know how prospective suppliers can save their companies money, make money for them and advance the buyers’ careers.

Aric Bandy, CEO of Minneapolis IT services firm Agosto, advised small-company executives to learn about potential customers’ buying behavior rather than sending in a salesperson.

He advocates networking, being different enough to attract attention and practicing giving the company's value proposition as an elevator pitch.

Panelist Jim Breen spent about 23 years in the food industry before launching Way Better Snacks in Minneapolis in 2011. The company's products are chips and crackers made from sprouted seeds and grains. The snacks, which are vegan, gluten-free, Kosher and not genetically modified, are available in more than 15,000 stores in the United States and Canada. Breen expects the company's revenue to top \$15 million this year.



Woodchuck's Ben Vandewymelenberg displays a wooden laptop skin. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

Breen works closely with Greg Zimprich of Kohnstamm Communications in St. Paul. Zimprich, a former director of brand public relations at General Mills, recommends choosing the first contact carefully when introducing a product to a potential buyer. He also suggested that companies seeking to sell to retailers consider the following:

- How well does the product fit in with the retailers' needs?
- Does it complement existing lines and add value?
- Is it on trend?
- Will consumers purchase it repeatedly?
- Do the company's supply chain, manufacturing and packaging capabilities ensure adequate quantities to stock shelves?

“In the end, it’s really about the brand being able to win the buyer’s interest and confidence that they can deliver,” Zimprich said.

Startup money

In the beginning, a company needs money to get started.

Woodchuck Case had \$90,000 in loans from family members and friends, noted VandenWymelenberg. The company employs seven and is in the process of seeking larger space of up to 10,000 square feet for manufacturing.

Woodchuck Case had more than \$200,000 in revenue in its first year and estimates \$1.6 million for 2013. Its goals include international distribution as well as manufacturing a wood-and-wool iPad sleeve to debut in 2014.

For the immediate future, VandenWymelenberg said Woodchuck is focused on Target “and how to be not only a good vendor but a great vendor who continues to aid them in what they’re looking for.”

He and Groejes set personal targets as well:

“We set goals for ourselves, like go to Italy and drive around on Ducatis.”



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