

PENPOINT Printer

It is midterm time, there are 2 hours left before presentations, the drawings still need to be printed, and the line at school is 30 people long. What can an architecture student do? Go to PENPOINT. George Hernandez prides himself in being one of the most reliable printers in the Los Angeles area. He is committed to providing the best service for all of his customers, no matter when the project is due.

The first time George and I met, I was running a little late getting my drawings plotted. The plotter at school would have taken several hours, and Kinko's did not plot as big as the drawings were, therefore the only other option was PENPOINT. After speeding on the freeway to Pasadena, the drawings took only about 5 minutes to plot, and I was on my way. Since that time, PENPOINT has expanded its services to laser cutting, custom printing, and architecture supplies.

The man behind the answer to procrastination problems is George Hernandez, the founder of PENPOINT. In my opinion, George fits the definition of an entrepreneur according to O'Malia because "he is driven, passionate, and devoted (p.7)." Although his background is not entrepreneurial, he found a way to put his skills and personality traits to good use. He grew up in Orange County, and attended Cal Poly Pomona where he earned his bachelor of Architecture in '97. George was the first in his family to complete a college degree. When he was growing up as a child, he enjoyed machines and figuring out how they work. His father attended an electrical trade school, and passed his knowledge to George. While at school, he became fascinated with the graphics produced by computers, and worked as a lab tech for nearly 5 years answering questions and helping students improve their presentations. Once he completed school, he took a job at an architecture firm, McDougal Design. While working there, he designed custom jobs but did not feel like he was able to put his technical skills to use. Once a job came through that interested him, he took the job, left the firm, and used the fee from the commission to start PENPOINT. Beginning a new

architecture firm by this way is not uncommon according to the Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice (p.44).

George really knew computers and how they worked, and understood how to utilize it well. The use of computers in architecture really took off in the mid-nineties. Although the technology was moving forward, few people possessed the knowledge to use it effectively. Even if someone knew how to use the software, getting the document plotted was another obstacle. George saw the opportunity to provide customers with a service that few other people could provide. He understood the file formats, and could print quality images with little problem. The characteristic that makes him such a great businessperson is the care he puts into his work and executing everything in his power to help the customer.

The funny thing about the inception of PENPOINT is that George just did it. He did not let money, or lack of a client base prevent his goal of starting a printing shop. He obtained the plotters from his old firm, and set them up in his new office. He did not have to take out many loans, or use too much of his own capital. The hardest part of starting was getting business. He advertised all over the local college campuses to the architecture students who needed printing in a pinch. He would sleep in a loft in the back office to accommodate for printing late at night. When I asked him if he did any research before just starting up, he said no, not really. He saw the need for large format and custom printing, and wanted to capitalize on his skills to make money.

Although there were risks, George took them head-on, with little hesitation. He had the passion and the drive to succeed no matter what it took. Although students were coming to him for plots, he needed more business to stay on top. He kept in touch with college friends who were now in firms, and other local firms for printing. He also attended tradeshow to show off his talent as a custom canvas and mural designer. Exposure like this landed him jobs to design the ceiling for the Venetian Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, and murals for the MotorCity Casino in Detroit.

The major problems with start-up were mostly getting customers. He did not have a marketing person helping him, forcing him to do most of it all by himself.

"Developing an effective marketing strategy is one of the most important activities for your start-up [business]" (Architects Handbook..., p.46). The biggest help to his business was word of mouth from his customers. When word got out of his business, and more importantly his service, customers were coming to him. George prides himself on providing a great service to his customers and treating them well. He is happy to help customers, and make sure everything is the way they want it. Another initial problem in the start-up was the amount of money needed to pay employees and for paying taxes to the government. George said, "The government is not your friend, but your partner." He said that the key to solving these problems is being cautious for things that can pop up. He allows additional time for midterm projects during the school year and money for taxes at the end of the year. By being cautious, you can prevent working in a crunch and avoid additional problems that may arise.

George is a very independent person, which makes it hard for him to seek out help from others. When he first started, he did not want to bring his parents into debt from the business, but they already had established credit, which he lacked at the time. He also needed help when his credit cards reached their limits. He has never really considered having a partner mostly because he does not feel that they could have the same passion for the business that he does. Many entrepreneurs have trouble letting people intrude on the business they put so much life into starting. Trusting someone else is also a concern.

Since its inception, PENPOINT has expanded into another office in the same strip, and now offers architecture supplies and laser cutting. George would like to continue to grow and expand its services with market needs as they arise. Since the office is kind of split, he would like to find a bigger place to house everything in the same location, but is only casually looking for a bigger facility. In addition, moving is a big process and not something he is ready to do. George would like to expand and hire new employees that possess the same computer knowledge and passion for the business as he does. I asked him if he was interested in earning his architectural license to do more designing of buildings. He said that it was a possibility, but probably

not in the near future. He is always looking for new challenges, and learning a new type of custom designing.

There are hardly any business slumps as different clients come and go with the seasons. Students keep him busy during the school year, while corporate firms pick up the slack in the summer while trying to win commissions. He also does trade shows when the business is slow to pick up more clients and specialty jobs.

What sets George apart from other printers is his strive to be the best at what he does in both printing and service. When he started PENPOINT, he felt that he had a niche and had the talent, machinery, and a desire to succeed. He feels that "If you're not good at something, then you can't do anything." In all of his years of working, George realized that he has been making money being the "nice guy." His personality and attitude may be the biggest assets to his business and the key success. "To create that kind of success, firms must set themselves apart and gain recognition from clients (Kolleeny & Linn, Architectural Record, p.76)." He attempts to make each customer feel that he or she is welcome and equal. Even though students sometimes have smaller projects that require time without as much payback, he treats them as if they were his best customers. He tries to make the whole process as quick and painless as possible. He looks out for the students to make sure their fonts are right, that there is a nice page layout, and that it prints properly. He says that bigger companies that do not have the same standard of care that he does turn off customers by their carelessness. He says that that attitude is due to a lack of respect. He sees it when other architects or suppliers try to bully him around, and treat him as if he is young and inexperienced.

Even though George is a very busy person, he did not have much trouble taking time to interview. Since the interview was on Saturday when business is usually slow, he was the only one working. In the time we were chatting, he had to work continuously. In addition, when a customer came in, he apologized for having to go and help them. He had to attend to customers, print their work, and talk with me all at the same time. In this case he practiced what he preached by helping a customer with their plots while respectfully having me wait a moment.

George was very willing to share experiences he has had, and lessons he learned from them. The best advice he gave, was to find something that I can be the best at, and do that. At first glance, it seems like an impossible task, to be the best at something. However, by looking more closely, being the best may include many things I am good at and combining them into one thing that I can excel doing. In school, I am working on an Architecture degree, which will allow for many job and career opportunities upon graduation. By earning a degree in design (which is primarily problem solving), I will expand my horizons in working, and that could lead me to do several things that I am good at. Thomas Fisher writes, "that we must all become more specialized in order to thrive (p.100)." Fisher is talking mostly about architecture design firms, but the statement could be true for most businesses. It is crucial to find the niche in the industry to offer the client a product or service that no one else can.

Passion and determination are other characteristics that George wanted me to keep in the back of my head. Success is determined by how much effort one puts into something. "I wasn't going to get anywhere wanting other people doing things for me," he explained. Cramer and Simpson state that, "[t]he success of any enterprise rests in the people who help make it happen (p. XV)."

This entrepreneur interview project has shed light on the amount of time, money, and work that goes into starting and managing a business. In my opinion, this project, and the Living Cases presented in class, shows more about what it is to be an entrepreneur than any textbook can. I really enjoyed going into the field to see an entrepreneur in action and getting a feel for the kind of personality and attitude needed to be successful in business. I also learned that an architecture degree does not guarantee pulling all-nighters for the rest of my professional career. I am interested in what other endeavors I can specialize in if I lose interest in the architecture profession.

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