

LESSONS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Many happy returns

Stuart Read and Nick Dew look at how the simple idea of reusable envelopes took off in America

So you think you need a big idea to start your own firm? How about an idea that's just the size of a business envelope? That's where Ann DeLaVergne started. Looking at the stack of used envelopes in her recycling bin, it occurred to her that a lot of small envelopes could make a big impact.

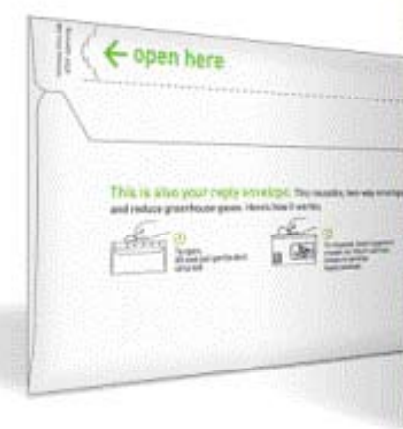
BACK-OF-THE-ENVELOPE MATHS

Further investigation told Ann that indeed there are a lot of small envelopes: in her home country of America at least 81 billion return envelopes are produced and sent through the mail each year.

That's pretty tough on the environment, because it means using 1.8 billion tons of wood, generating a billion pounds of greenhouse gases. It also requires more than 71 trillion units of energy to process and transport. It's tough on the bottom line too, as return envelopes represent between 15 and 45 per cent of a business's direct mailing costs.

BULK POST

As an organic farmer with a philosophy of reuse, Ann already saved large envelopes to send out again. But what if she could apply that thinking to 81 billion return envelopes? With that in mind, she founded ecoEnvelopes, a firm premised on using one envelope instead of two for round trip business mail transactions.



PEN PALS

Figuring out how to transform her small idea into a big one, however, was not obvious. So Ann, who had also worked as a graphic designer, sat down at her kitchen table with some office supplies and a sewing machine (to make perforations in paper) and prototyped her reusable envelope idea. Her first effort yielded ten envelopes, which she mailed off to friends around the country. When all ten came back, she knew that she was on to something.

DIRECT MAIL COMMUNITY

Partnerships and communities can provide the critical mass for an entrepreneurial idea. Ann began extending her community beyond her friends to include businesses that both use the mail and have an environmental mission. The first were The Land Stewardship Project and the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. In addition to feeling better about their direct mail efforts and saving money too, these organisations have increased response rates using

Zip-close reusable ecoEnvelopes have increased direct mail responses

ecoEnvelopes to as high as 8 per cent, roughly ten times the average for mail campaigns.

CHEQUE IN THE MAIL

Today, ecoEnvelopes produces and markets a range of patented zip-close reusable envelopes, manufactured with paper from managed forests and containing up to 100 per cent post-consumer waste content. In January of 2008, ecoEnvelopes received a \$570,000 investment from TC Angels, the largest single investment the group has made to date, to help hire employees, secure patents and take the invention to companies around the globe. Just a month later, the US Postal Service granted Ann a National Consumer Ruling, making ecoEnvelopes the first reusable envelope certified for standard mail. Here's to the small ideas. ●



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