



Road kiln: contest winner Tom Sudes (above) with Lescek the lumberman outside his converted railroad car. A power meeting (right) at a women's cooperative in Manila.



Fantastic Voyage

SUCCESS contest winner reports on the revolution in global entrepreneurialism

FIGHTING GLOBAL POVERTY WITH Entrepreneurship — that was the idea behind the SUCCESS/Opportunity International "Join Our Revolution" contest, announced last year. An around-the-world trip would be awarded to the reader with the best plan. The contest was sponsored by Strategic Telecom Systems, a travel and telecommunications company. Opportunity International is an Elmhurst, Ill.-based nonprofit organization that gives loans — not handouts, mind you — to microbusinesses in the Third World and eastern Europe.

And the winner was ... Thomas J. Sudes, president of the Sudes Group in Delaware, Ohio, a consultant who helps nonprofit groups function in a more businesslike way. Sudes felt that new entrepreneurs in the Third World probably lacked role models, so

he proposed linking Opportunity's clients with successful entrepreneurs. Send business owners to the Third World on "entrepreneurial sabbaticals," wrote Sudes. Partner Opportunity clients with "entrepreneurial mentors," and create Mentors on the Net, a Web site where micro-entrepreneurs can exchange ideas with other businesspeople. Good stuff, we decided.

On April 6, 1997, Tom Sudes left on a grueling 32,150-mile trip that could turn out to be the first of the entrepreneurial sabbaticals he envisioned. He visited Opportunity's clients in Poland, Russia, India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, then headed to Opportunity's headquarters in Australia. Along the way, he met "no dignitaries, just people with incredible dignity." It was, as he reports, an experience of a lifetime.

WHO'S LOANWORTHY?

Before I tell you about my trip, first a few words on what I learned about Opportunity International, an extraordinary nonprofit organization dedicated to boosting entrepreneurialism worldwide. To determine who's loanworthy, it divides prospective clients into three groups. Those in the first have collateral and can get a bank loan. They don't need Opportunity. Those in the second will never be able to pay a loan back. Any money given is effectively a grant. Members of the third group lack collateral but will use the loan to build a business. These motivated individuals will pay their debts.

Opportunity focuses on the last group like a laser beam. The result is a 95 percent payback rate on loans no bank would make — and whole communities rising from poverty. The Opportunity clients I met on my travels had a profound impact on me. Here are some of the lessons I learned from them.

1. Great entrepreneurs thrive on obstacles.

Think you're operating with adequate resources? Consider the case of Lescek the lumberman, whom I met in Kraków, Poland. He didn't have even \$5,000 to buy a ready-made kiln for drying the lumber he cuts. But he was able to borrow \$1,000 to buy a heating-ventilator system. Then, to house it, he persuaded the local railroad to give him an abandoned railroad car.

Lescek installed the system in the car and created a kiln that worked so well that he had excess capacity. Soon he was drying wood not just for himself but for other lumber companies as well. Demand was so great that he decided to install a second drying unit, but the power company wouldn't supply him with additional electricity. Undaunted, Lescek made plans to burn scrap wood and dust from his lumberyard to heat water, which he was then going to run through the pipes in his new kiln.

The lesson: The next time any of us imagines we can't be productive or profitable because we don't have enough bandwidth, or a sixth phone line or a fourth electrical outlet, we should stop and think about Lescek. Do any of these inconveniences really hinder us from achieving the goals of our business? Great entrepreneurs don't sweat the minor details.

2. Ask a ton of questions.

Lescek got that railroad car for a simple reason. He asked. In India, I saved my sponsor, Strategic Telecom Systems, \$170 a night simply by asking whether my hotel had a better rate. Successful people — and businesses — ask questions. They ask because they're always in a learning mode and because they're looking for new opportunities.

Big businesses do it, and little guys do it if they have big dreams. Qantas and British Airways raised more than \$4 million for charity simply by asking passengers for spare currency on international flights, such as the one I took from London to India.

Once you start asking, you'll be amazed at how often people say, "Okay." Don't be embarrassed. You're not imposing — you're giving someone an opportunity to feel good about helping you. The worst that can happen is that he'll say no.

3. Adjust your attitude.

My first day in the Russian town of Nizhni Novgorod was a disaster. My room was freezing, I felt as if I had the flu, and no one in my hotel spoke English. My hosts at Vozmozhnost (Russian for "opportunity for all") packed my schedule with staff members and bureaucrats who had nothing to say. I decided that I hated Russia.

The next morning I went for a walk in the sunshine. Feeling better, I asked my hosts whether I could meet entrepreneurs. They were surprised at my request — and pleased to comply. Soon I encountered some incredible businesswomen and came to love the city and its people. Nizhni hadn't changed. My attitude had.

Positive mental attitude was something I saw over and over again. Natalya, a Vozmozhnost staff member, had lost her business when taxes were raised without notice. She vowed not to let her failure get her down and started a support center to help other businesswomen.

Jennie Lee ran a rag business in a Manila slum. She started with a \$100 loan to buy a sewing machine and rose to become treasurer of her women's business cooperative. She just knew she was going to succeed — and she did.

4. Don't go it alone.

The weekly meetings held by 50 rag makers in an alley in Manila's Barenga barrio began with prayer. The participants then

Cooperation is key. We all need to tap one another's brain power.



Above the rim: shooting for lofty goals in Manila (top). An orphanage (right) run by Mother Teresa's order in Bangladesh.



recited the seven objectives of their cooperative. The main topic — not surprisingly — was how to be more successful.

For three hours they discussed cooperation, responsibility, understanding, self-discipline, respect, open communication, handling confrontation, and leadership. The topics they treated were very similar to the ones that came up at the team-building meetings I'd conducted back home.

We all need to tap one another's brain power. No entrepreneur knows it all. No matter how strong your conviction, you need the synergy of people working together.

5. Find a balance.

Everywhere I went in the Third World, I found that the definition of success was

"making a better life for one's children." Business was a family matter. For many entrepreneurs in the United States, balancing family responsibilities, businesses, and personal needs is a big dilemma. Ask yourself what your definition of success is — what do you want for your family and yourself? You can't succeed in business at the expense of your family and those who love you. **S**

To learn how you can impact these micro-entrepreneurs, call Opportunity International at 630-575-0533. To contact Strategic Telecom Systems about business and travel opportunities, call 423-584-4460. For more on Tom's trip, visit www.eagles.net/e-spirit.