

NEWS

Imagining 'accelerated' social change

JAN VARNER

UNITED WAY



Last month's breakfast, we spoke with Benton Leong about an innovative group of KW residents who strengthened their neighbourhood from the playground up. We continue the theme of community innovation this month over breakfast with John Baker, Founder, president & CEO of Desire2Learn Incorporated.

I first met John nine years ago, just after his graduation from UW. He was already onto the "big idea" that became Desire2Learn, and I was struck then by his passion and dedication to putting that idea into action.

Nine years and countless awards later, John is still just as energetic and can get just as excited by a new idea. I was curious to hear his thoughts on innovation and how some of his lessons learned might apply to social innovation in our community.

Here's a snapshot of our breakfast chat:
Jan: You're a strong believer in community involvement. Tell us a little about how and why you personally give back to your community.

John: I believe very strongly that when you're in a community, whether working or living, you need to be an active participant – giving, contributing, seeking ways to improve and enhance the neighbourhood. Desire2Learn employees are actively involved in supporting and fundraising for charities both within the Waterloo Region and beyond. We created our Desire2Learn Active Care Team In Our Neighbourhood (ACTION) Committee in 2004.

Employees of Desire2Learn regularly give generously of their time, their energy and, of course, their donations. For example, more than one dozen events and activities spanned the twelve months of 2008 with funds, food, clothing or time being donated to both local

and more far reaching organizations. It's a corporate culture of involvement.

Jan: Located in the heart of downtown Kitchener, Desire2Learn has a strong vested interest in the vibrancy and safety of its neighbourhood. Tell me about why you're downtown and what your neighbourhood experience has been.

John: We care about the community. We live here and work here. We bring clients here and we want to attract talented, creative employees.

Safety has been key for us. We started with the simple things, like arranging for the lights to be left on longer to allow our employees to walk safely to their cars. We want to attract

great people and offer a positive environment for our clients, and a few years ago, the downtown location did scare some prospects off. There's a genuine commitment to change that perception. It's improved threefold since we've been here.

There's still some way to go, but we're actively working with our neighbours and with local officials to do what we can to keep the neighbourhood safe and attractive for everyone to enjoy. You know, the importance of being a good neighbour applies to a business just as much as it does to our residential neighbourhoods.

Jan: You have your choice of communities to locate your business. Why Waterloo Region?

John: The first reason is the proximity to post-secondary institutions. They're our clients, but also a great source of employee talent and ongoing learning for our people. But beyond the obvious post-secondary link, this area has offered us such an incredible support network, both through Communitytech and through the not-for-profit and public sectors. I'm amazed at how strong the networks are here, and I think that sets this region apart.

Jan: You were just named one of the Record's Waterloo Region Top 40 under 40. Congratulations on the award. You were honoured partly because of your entrepreneurial spirit. Tell us how you'd describe innovation.

John: I look at it as new solutions to problems, rather than just using the same tried ones. There's usually more risk involved too. The term we use in tech is 'disruptive innovation' – the idea that sometimes organizations and industries need revolutionary change, not just small, incremental improvements.

In technology, disruptive innovation is often radically different from the technology it displaces. Sometimes it's even a poorer performer. But it captures the imagination of the market because it brings a new twist or

disruptive innovation to social change?

John: I think you're on to something. It's incremental change, such as new bridges being built between business, the community and government. I do think positive social change is happening in pockets. But I envision an "Accelerator Centre" for social change. If you think about how technology Accelerator Centre acts as a catalyst for the growth of high-tech firms, imagine what this model could help accomplish around social issues. It could capture the hearts and minds of students and others within the community to experiment with new ideas and create business or projects focused on solving complex social issues.

Jan: That's very much in keeping with a recent breakfast chat with Tim Jackson. The Region, a new approach to the leadership and governance of our social sector.

John: I see huge value in this, and I'd push it one step further. I can imagine a hub for social innovation. I'd love to see Kitchener Waterloo known as the capital of social innovation in Canada. As an example, Desire2Learn spends 40 per cent of our budget on research and development. So our ideas flop, but if we didn't invest in R&D, it wouldn't be as successful and we'd have opportunity to fund the necessary small incremental changes we need to make today. Looking at not-for-profit, if you're a cycle of raising and allocating funds, which really does become almost repetitive, what and how do you truly innovate?

Jan: It depends if you're talking capital Innovate or small "i" innovate. I think we're often, as a sector, perceived as more in the incremental change category. At United Way we're working hard to make transformational change, or perhaps disruptive change, as you call it. We've created regional priorities and we're working hard to learn about and invest in root causes versus symptoms of community issues. That is a huge shift in what we do and how

PHOTO BY JENNIFER HARRIS

Social issues need new approach

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One of the biggest challenges is that when we're tackling issues like homelessness, poverty and family health, we need to do more than a quick fix. Tech companies are funded when they're three years away from market. If it takes this long to bring a product to market, making an impact on social issues can take at least this long. But some days I'm not that patient.

John: I think it's a matter of approaching it in a new way. Businesses want to solve problems. If you bring us a problem and an innovative strategy to solve it, I think you'll see us pay attention. But I agree about the impatience part.

Collaboration, working together to solve an issue that has implications for all of us – in the neighbourhood, in the community, globally – and bringing together perspectives from a wide-range of sectors is just the kind of approach we need. We have the talent in this community and a long history of strong support for social issues – we now need to channel that energy into innovative new ways that can spark big changes.

Note: I'm taking reservations for this column.

If you'd like to meet me for breakfast

and a discussion, please drop me a note at

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