

Chapter 49

Improving Lives through Mobility: A Case Study of Amigo Mobility International

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ABSTRACT

Researchers must acknowledge that entrepreneurship studies could and should be carried out at multiple levels of analysis—conceptual, empirical, and practical frameworks. The authors argue that practical level analysis is critical but valuable, since the reasons for studying entrepreneurship in the practical level lies in the characteristics of the entrepreneurial phenomenon itself. Every entrepreneur is different, so it makes more sense to know them individually, and in this chapter, the authors attempt to discuss a case study on a how a successful entrepreneurial family has been running their business for half a century. While discussing mental entrepreneurial motivations, women entrepreneurs, copreneurs, and young entrepreneurs in this case study, they also focus on the external and internal challenges these entrepreneurs are facing on a daily basis. At the end, this case study makes recommendations for the prospective entrepreneur.

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that entrepreneurship is the driver of economic development and growth (Acs, 2006; Audretsch & Acs, 1994; Schumpeter, 1934). Family firms are said to be the originating form of any business activity (Wakefield, 1995), dominating the economic landscape of most major economies in the world (Shanker et al., 1996; Klein, 2000; Heck et al., 2001; Morck et

al., 2003; IFERA, 2003; Astrachan et al., 2003). Two thirds of all enterprises worldwide are said to be family-owned and/or managed (Gersick et al., 1997), but becoming a successful entrepreneur is challenging. This case illustrates the journey of an entrepreneur who gives mobility to thousands of immobile persons in this world. He uses simple things in innovative ways to build a mobile chair that helps physically challenged individuals to move independently. Yes, we are talking about

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the world famous company, Amigo Mobility International, whose creative thought has allowed thousands of people to live independent lives. The founder of this company, Mr. Al Thieme, started out as a plumbing and heating contractor. A creative mind never stops thinking and Al also never stopped thinking about how he could help make a family member mobile and independent. A continuous, persistent and honest drive helped him to put together some sketches to build a mobility device for that family member. His first design was small, compact and uncomfortable, but it was great for getting around in the store.

There are thousands and thousands immobile people in the world, but how, Al wondered, could he possibly make them mobile? This overarching question arouse in his mind and as a result, he founded the company, Amigo Mobility International, in 1968 which is the world's first company devoted to satisfying the dream of mobility for thousands of immobile persons. Since then, the company has gone through several changes but they never stop thinking about immobile individuals and making mobile devices for them.

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Currently this company is growing and the demand for their mobile devices is not only coming from the domestic market, these devices are gaining popularity in the international market as well. This mobile device maker has about 85 employees in their main location, which is in Bridgeport Township, Michigan. This is a classic case study where entrepreneurship creates entrepreneurs in that Al prepared his wife Beth Thieme for this business and now Mrs. Thieme is preparing her son and daughter as successors and the company's future stakeholders. Hence, this case study demonstrates how to become an entrepreneur and how to prepare entrepreneurs as well.

In today's world women entrepreneurs are not rare, but fifty years ago it was a challenge for a

woman to enter into a business. This is also a story of successful women entrepreneurs. Despite many barriers and obstacles, Beth Thieme becomes the key person of this company, but the question is, how did she get there and how could she achieve these significant accomplishments? At the end, hopefully this case study will provide encouragement to readers and motivate them enough to become entrepreneurs. In the following sections we will explore more about this company, about the business and strategies of developing successors, and tactics to adjust market demand.

Business

The initial idea of developing a power operated scooter was to help a family member. Creating a "business" with this device didn't occur to him until Al felt the joy of giving someone liberty, making someone independent or free. A family member began to lose her mobility and witnessing this loss of independence was painful. At that time Al was running his own business as a plumbing and heating contractor. During the day he was busy with his regular job, but he had started thinking about building an innovative device to help with mobility. Thieme invented the first ever power operated vehicle or scooter—The "*Amigo*," which means *friend*! The device was named the Amigo for being such a friend to people with disabilities, and the mobility POV/scooter industry was born. Consequently, Amigo Mobility International, Inc. was founded on November 12, 1968 and, as a result, an entire industry was born on the same day.

Initially his workshop was a tiny room without any sort of fancy equipment or facilities, but he used the experience he learned from his plumbing and heating business. He thinks that he received the best education through hands-on experience and hard work. Thieme met with many organizations to explain the Amigo's benefits and functionality and the company started to grow. Today, the headquarters occupies nearly 52,000 square feet of space which includes various departments from

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