



Take a quick look at the resume of John Weiss and you might assume by his early success that he was a straight-A student, and had a clear focus on a business career.

Education

1990 — B.S. mechanical engineering technology, UW-Parkside

1993 — Executive MBA, UW-Milwaukee

Professional Experience

1990 to Present — Creator of numerous highly successful Internet ventures including yesmail.com, a permission e-mail database

2000 — CMGI purchases yesmail.com for \$770 million

Way back in third grade, however, “My teacher told my parents, ‘He’s not college material – your kid might make it out of high school, but he’s not college material.’” Weiss recalled.

So what happened?

In a word (actually four words) “a never-stop characteristic.”

“When I was approached to quit my job and launch what became yesmail, I was concerned about starting up a business with a number of partners,” Weiss said. “But I had done competitive Olympic wind surfing with the partners, and we all shared a never-stop characteristic.”

No doubt, a never-stop characteristic can take a person a long way in life. A little friendly advice doesn’t hurt, either.

One summer, Weiss had a job bagging beer can lids. An engineer at the company told Weiss that he had a similar summer job while in college – good money, but no experience in engineering when he graduated. “He said that all the other engineers who did co-ops got jobs right away,” Weiss said. “He told me to get experience and don’t come back here bagging beer can lids.”

Weiss took the advice and landed a co-op at Pneumatech, Inc., in Kenosha. The experience also proved beneficial in the classroom. “I

(Weiss continued page 10)

Never Say, ‘Stop’

Whether Kenosha native John Weiss is wind surfing, sailing or developing online companies, ‘stop’ is not in the vocabulary. That, and a lot of talent, has meant a great deal of success.

(Weiss continued from page 5)

applied what I was learning at Pneumatech to the engineering classes I was taking here and it made things more interesting,” Weiss said.

The results were impressive. “My second year here, I received a letter from the dean putting me on probation because I hadn’t done certain things within the breadth-of-knowledge courses,” Weiss said. “I was able to get caught up and I took care of that. The last year I was here, I got another letter from the dean and I didn’t open it for three days because I was thinking it would be very bad to be thrown out of school my last year. And when I opened it, I was on the dean’s list – not on the bad list but on the good list.”

When he graduated, Weiss became a product engineer at Pneumatech and quickly moved from designing the products to product training with distributors, overseeing the building of the project, and going on location for the startup. That meant quite a bit of travel including Japan and China.

While Weiss was establishing himself as a talented engineer, something called the Internet was beginning to take shape. There was a ton of information on this new Internet, but how were people supposed to know what was available and where to find it? A friend whom Weiss had competed against in Olympic sailing entered the picture. Along with two other people they built an online directory in 1994 called Starting Point.

Just before a trip to Asia, the Starting Point partner called to say that he thought the Internet might really be something. “I said, ‘Yeah, great, I’ll be back in three months,’” Weiss recalled. “While I was in China he called and said, ‘Get home now, we’re all quitting our jobs and officially starting this company.’ I said, ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’ll see you in six weeks.’”

When Weiss returned, his future partners convinced him to head the sales side of the new venture. In less than two years, the company had grown to 50 employees and was generating more than \$6 million in revenue. Starting Point became the eighth most viewed site on the Internet. But this was the mid-90s and things were changing fast. A new search engine – Excite – came on the scene and traffic on Starting Point began to decline.



At the same time, a marketing services arm of Weiss’s company was growing. The partners fed that side of the business and followed the growth model used by Excite: They hired a Harvard MBA – who had venture capital background and was well connected – to be their CEO. “We hired a lot of people with wonderful track records,” Weiss said. “We were able to raise more money than we wanted and we took the company public.”

The result was yesmail.com and a wild ride through the rise and subsequent fall of dot-com companies in the ‘90s.

“After I left yesmail, I spent about six months with CMGI and confirmed that I am a very bad fit in a large organization with politics,” Weiss said.

Eventually, Weiss and the COO from yesmail.com bought Scribe, an online transcription company serving various industries including legal and medical.

Within two years, Scribe changed from a transcription company that had a little bit of technology to a technology company that served the transcription and medical documentation markets.

According to Weiss, Scribe is becoming a change agent in an industry that does not embrace change. That happens by minimizing the perception of change in the way the user deals with patient record information, while changing the technical side of how the information is handled.

Scribe has less than 20 employees and that’s the way Weiss likes it. Beyond 50 employees, and any company gets out of his “fun” level. “(With a small company) there’s less politics and you’re able to get

things done quickly,” he said. Getting things done quickly has allowed Weiss and his partners to create complementary Internet ventures.

“We like to look for areas where there is pain (need) and that are being underserved or incorrectly served,” Weiss said. “I heard time and time again from the transcription companies that they’re more of an HR company than they are a transcription company. They spend more time hiring – with all the turnover they have – and they have a hard time qualifying good people.... So I thought, hmm, can we use our existing technology to create a testing tool that can allow them to easily test someone online in a controlled environment to make their hiring easier?

“Once the need was identified, the question became: ‘Is this a product that is a fit with what Scribe offers today?’” The result was a new company called iWhiteboard.

For most of his career, Weiss has focused on sales and he appreciates the role sales plays in the success of any company.

“Quality systems don’t matter if you don’t have customers,” Weiss said. “If you don’t sell the product, you don’t have a company.”

During his 17-year career, one constant has been change. “Everybody has to be willing to change,” he said. “Looking at change as being something that is negative and resisting it is only going to cause pain. In business moving forward, change is going to be constant and you have to be able to adapt to constant change.”

And that’s OK with Weiss who says change takes him out of his comfort zone and forces him to continuously learn. Not bad for someone who admits he wasn’t the smartest person in the class and wasn’t even supposed to be college material.

Whether it was the engineer at the can factory or the probation letter from the dean, something triggered that “never-stop characteristic” in Weiss’s desire to learn.

“If you want something bad enough,” he said, “you can go and get it. If you fail, learn from it and try again – and try again. You can be a C student and push your way through and be successful. But doing so today and in the future without a college degree is really, really difficult – if not close to impossible.”