

Getting repeatedly robbed was the best thing that could have happened to Vincent G eracitano



Canada's most wanted

Bio
Age 46
Education
 B.A. in marketing,
 Concordia University
First job Sales clerk
 at Zellers (left after
 it was robbed for a
 second time)

When thieves broke into his small plaque shop, Vincent G eracitano decided to break into the TV business.

In the spring of 1999, burglars had kicked in the door of his Montreal store and stolen thousands of dollars in computers. G eracitano installed cameras, and when the culprits came back, their brazen second attempt was caught on tape. There was little he could do with the footage, however: The police were too busy, and no newscasts would bother with it.

But what if he had his own TV channel? Soon, Avis de Recherche was born. The station airs video of unsolved crimes, missing children and programs about crime prevention. After more than three years of losses, the French-language station was granted mandatory carriage on cable and satellite TV in Quebec when it proved to regulators that it was providing a public service. The ruling enables the company to collect six cents a month per subscriber, which amounts to \$1.3 million a year in revenue. It's an arrangement every small channel covets, and few get. But things weren't always so rosy. G eracitano talks about the dream that nearly bankrupted him, and what aspiring business owners should watch out for. —GRANT ROBERTSON

You launched a crime-fighting TV channel. What sort of experience did you have going in?

I had no experience. I've just always been the type who pursues an idea if I think it's worth it. I'm not going to sit around and wait for someone else to do it. So I applied for licences from the CRTC: one in French and one in English. That took about a year and a half. Meanwhile, I was pursuing police forces to get a feel for whether they wanted the service or not.

Landing a licence from the CRTC isn't easy. How did you do it?

I didn't have the money to hire a lot of experts, but at the hearings I was accompanied by a commander from the Montreal Police Service and by a former RCMP commissioner. I also had letters of support from more than 50 mayors,

almost every police chief in Canada, and the federal Public Safety Minister.

How did you get financing?

For the life of me, I couldn't get any financing. I had to mortgage my home and put in my own savings. I also had to borrow money from my parents. I realized early on that I had embarked on something that was much, much more difficult than I had thought.

How does your business model work in terms of ad sales and program spending?

When I started, the idea was to have advertisers. Unfortunately, that never happened. Not everyone wants to put their logo next to a picture of a missing child. So I gave up on that. I then applied for mandatory distribution from the CRTC, which means subscribers will have to pay for the service. But in order to get it, we have to allocate 43% of our revenue to creating safety and crime-prevention messages. So we will be producing most of our content, and will buy some of it from Canadian producers. For example, all of the Montreal police press conferences will be televised live.

What lessons do you have for other entrepreneurs?

The main piece of advice I can give is, be in control of your own destiny. I've had to deal with people who wanted me to change the licence and do something else that would make more money. I could easily have made ends meet by selling airtime late at night to infomercials, for sex lines or whatever. But I just didn't think it was right. How can you go from showing the picture of a missing child to five minutes later selling girls on a beach? I may have been risking everything, but I

GOING IN COLD: FOUR WAYS TO SUCCEED IN AN INDUSTRY YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT

DO YOUR HOMEWORK Most industries are governed by a regulator. Research what they want. Then, figure out how to give it to them.

GET HELP Sometimes a little experience is necessary, even if it comes with an invoice. Expert consultants can often spot problems that rookies miss.

FIND PEOPLE YOU TRUST You can't be an expert in everything, so you'll need to delegate, but don't hand over the company credit card to someone unless you have absolute trust in their ability to make the right decisions.

KEEP EVERYBODY ON THEIR TOES Never stop asking the tough questions. You may lack experience, but a common sense approach will ensure those who know more are still honest with you.

refused to budge. If I didn't have voting control of the company, all would have been lost.

You needed a lot of equipment. Not being a TV veteran, how did you handle that?

I had to rely on engineers and trust them that a \$10,000 piece of equipment was something we actually needed. I had to have a certain amount of blind trust in the people around me. I've built a whole studio based on what others were telling me we needed.

When will you break even?

It will probably be a couple of years from now. We've been able to successfully run the channel on a shoestring so far. Anyone familiar with the TV business knows that you can't operate on \$350,000 or so a year. It's just inconceivable. Over the first three years, we had next to nothing in revenues, so the money in the account went down steadily. With the CRTC decision, we will now be generating revenues. So the break-even point will probably be in 2 1/2 years.

What happens now?

We're hoping that by this summer we will start seeing some cash flow. Once that happens, the game plan is to improve the French-language service, and then go back to the CRTC and show them the benefits. I want to demonstrate everything that can be achieved with the service, and request that a similar one be approved for the rest of Canada.

Did they ever catch the guys who robbed your shop?

Not to my knowledge, no. The channel didn't come on the air until five years later. But chances are, those guys are behind bars for something else.