MBA Grads at the Intersection of Tourism & Technology

What do we do when faced with a problem? We turn to technology for an answer. But what do we do if the technology doesn’t exist yet?

Connecting Mops to Floors: The cleaning industry’s “swipe right”

Nowadays apps help us do everything from selling furniture to finding a date. But when Jesal Shah, MBA ’15, went looking for a last-minute cleaning service to tidy up his short-term rental apartment between bookings, he couldn’t find one. “No one could do it on short notice,” says Shah. It was this recurring issue that led him to partner with fellow UVic graduates Andrew Spence, MBA ’15, and Abhinav Rai, MBA ’15, to start BnBreeze.

BnBreeze is an online platform that matches people who need their house cleaned with cleaners who are available to do it. Users simply log on, list the service they require and registered cleaners pick up the jobs that fit their schedule. Similar in concept to other services in the sharing or “access” economy, the format is familiar to users of those services—think Airbnb and Zipcar.

“We wanted to make it simple and easy to use,” says Shah. “Like an Uber for cleaning.”

Although simple in concept, the company has been a year in the making. The team balance BnBreeze with full-time jobs and families, each putting in a couple of hours every night to meet their goals.

These goals have changed a bit based on what they’ve discovered through market research. “We talked to people in our network,” says Shah, who also cold-called cleaners to determine if there was a workforce available to meet the demand. Cleaners supported the idea, expressing interest in a service that would allow them to pick up extra work. However, on the other side of the equation, they found there was an opportunity to expand their target audience.

While BnBreeze was originally envisioned as a service specific to rental property owners, they quickly discovered that the need for on-demand cleaning was wide-reaching. Everyone from bed and breakfasts to realtors and ordinary bystanders expressed interest. “We even had people overhear our conversation in coffee shops and then come up to us and say that they would use the service,” says Spence.

Fueled by this positive feedback they were able to launch the website in October 2016, two months ahead of schedule. Each month since has been aimed at improving usability based on customer feedback.

“The challenge is understanding what our clients need and then translating that into creating the product,” says Rai, who built the platform. “Changes cannot be implemented overnight.”

Although the website is still evolving, it is doing its job. In fact, BnBreeze matched someone in need of a same-day cleaning with an available agent during the interview for this article. Registration and job matching numbers are growing between 15-20 per cent each month. Right now BnBreeze is only available in the Greater Victoria area, but next steps include moving into a second market. Long term, Shah would love to see BnBreeze available nationally and expand to other home services such as landscaping and plumbing. In the meantime, they are gaining traction among cleaning agents and property owners, and meeting the demand Shah identified from the start.

“I get excited about the fact that it’s the first step,” says Spence. “It’s the first step.”

TravelMetrics: Up-and-comer profile

WHO: Bhupinder Dulku, MBA ’17, and partner Deepali Arora, Ph.D.

WHAT: TravelMetrics is a website for travel planning where users can find information on safety, climate, cost and news relevant to the city they want to travel to. All information is sourced from credible outlets and government institutions before being analyzed by TravelMetrics’ algorithms.

MARKET NEED: “The idea emerged from the realization that there was a gap of trustworthy travel information,” says Dulku. “Those looking to make travel decisions based on cost and safety found the available information was of questionable reliability and lacking the convenience of a centralized repository.”

START-UP RESOURCES: To get to this point Dulku participated in several start-up programs, including the Coast Capital Savings Innovation Centre (formerly the Innovation Centre for Entrepreneurs) Pitch It Competition (1st place) and Plan-It Competition (2nd place). This ultimately led his idea to the Innovation Centre’s Incubator Program. Each experience along the way taught Dulku how to improve the platform.

“The Incubator Program helped us bring business alignment to our technology,” says Dulku. “We’re really good at designing business alignment to our technology, but we were not connecting that to a business model.”

Eventually Dulku envisions growing TravelMetrics into the go-to platform for travel planning and intelligence. “We’re building an online community that values safety,” he states. Dulku began the VIATEC Venture Acceleration Program in September 2016. Since then he has been focused on getting the project investor-ready.