

V is for Visionary: Five Lessons from Tech Titan Josh Kopelman

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Tech entrepreneur and investor Josh Kopelman

Akash Gupta, 17, is a native of Delhi, India, and will be a senior this fall at Westwood Community High School in Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada. Gupta, an aspiring entrepreneur, co-founded The Great Green North with a group of friends, a business that sells composting kits to make Fort McMurray a “greener and more sustainable community.” Says Gupta: “As vice president of finance, I issued shareholders’ checks, made accounting journal entries, created a business plan and came up with the company’s future financial goals.” He also helps out with the family construction business building family homes. He was excited this summer, while attending Wharton’s Leadership in the Business World (LBW) program, to meet accomplished entrepreneur Josh Kopelman. In the essay that follows, he writes about Kopelman’s advice for up-and-comers.

What is information technology? The term refers to the organization or communication of information through mediums that are related to technology, such as computers and telephones. We use and encounter information technology every day – it is, simply put, a way of life. Entrepreneurs (visionaries who turn their ideas into businesses) are building businesses that leverage our obsession with information technology. Some popular examples are Facebook, Groupon, Seamless, Twitter, MySpace, Pay Pal, and the list goes on and on.

This summer, I met info tech pioneer Josh Kopelman. Kopelman started Half.com in 1999 to solve two pressing issues in his life: the need to be entrepreneurial and the desire to rid his shelves of the clutter of dust-covered books and movie DVDs. Kopelman created a website where book, movie, game and music lovers could sell their used products at a reduced price to another individual, who would then sell it to another and so on. So instead of paying \$20 to read a book, you might only pay \$3. Kopelman soon realized that the success of his website depended largely on its visibility. In a well-known innovative marketing campaign (and successful publicity stunt), he and his team convinced officials to rename the town of Halfway, Ore., to Half.com for a year. The press jumped on the story, featuring Kopelman and his company-town signature, and giving his new business all kinds of exposure. Online auctioneer eBay bought Half.com in 2000 for \$350 million in stock.

These days, Kopelman is managing director of First Round Capital, a seed-stage venture fund in Philadelphia. He is an investor, director and advisor to several software and Internet firms, including myYearbook, VideoEgg and Odeo, and

made it to No. 6 on the 2012 *Forbes* list of the top 100 tech investors. Here are some of Kopelman's most valuable insights for budding entrepreneurs:

Start Early. Become entrepreneurs at a young age. "It teaches you a lot, like it did for me," said Kopelman, who in middle school would buy candy at Costco and sell it to his friends on the bus at a high mark up. The next Instagram or Facebook will be founded in a college dorm room, he predicts, which is why he started a small venture capital firm named the Dorm Room Fund that invests in college students' promising ideas.

You Are Your Business. When Kopelman looks to invest in a start-up, he especially considers the caliber and talent of the entrepreneur. "I invest in the person," he said.

A good entrepreneur must be able to tell a story in order to sell his vision.

Technology Is the Future. Kopelman believes that our kids will not have to carry wallets to pay for things. What's more, they will not have to drive or park cars because cars will be able to drive themselves. Kopelman stresses that entrepreneurs of every kind should have a working knowledge of software and computers. Embrace information technology, he said, because it is here to stay and will define our future.

The Write Stuff. Not every entrepreneur has a transformative light bulb moment that instantly makes him or her a millionaire. Deciding on the right idea for a business takes time – and observation. Kopelman's suggestion: Start keeping a journal. In this journal, you should write three things that you didn't like about your day and three things that went well. You'll find the next great idea in your journal, said Kopelman, because the best ideas solve an issue or inconvenience. Think of that little piece of plastic on top of your pizza that prevents the cheese from getting squashed during delivery. Not particularly high-tech, but extremely practical.

Creativity Counts. Kopelman and his father, Richard – a professor of organizational behavior and management at Baruch College in New York City — were featured this June in *The Wall Street Journal's* "The Accelerators" blog about the strategies and challenges of creating a new business. The article notes that Josh's education in entrepreneurship came from his father repeatedly encouraging him to come up with creative solutions to everyday problems, viewing impediments as the chance to ask, "What if?" When Josh received an Apple II+ in 1983, his father asked: What problems can we solve quickly with a computer? They came up with the idea of using a mail merge to enable local gas stations to send car owners reminder post cards six weeks before inspections were due. Business, like art, encourages creative thinking.

Questions

Who is Josh Kopelman? Have you ever heard of him before? Why do you think he has been a successful entrepreneur?

Are entrepreneurial skills limited only to small businesses? Is it also important to be entrepreneurial in big business? How so?

Is business creative? Have you ever thought of it in that light or do you consider it a numbers game that stifles creativity? What is innovation and how critical is it to business?

Related Links

- [The Wall Street Journal: Learning Entrepreneurship from Juice Stands](#)
- [Marketwatch: eBay Acquires Half.com](#)
- [First Round Capital](#)
- [Wired.com: Welcome to Half.com, Oregon](#)