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No Talk, All Action  
Action-Based Networking

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LET'S SAY YOU'RE new to a city and you want to start dating. Where do you go to begin? Do you walk into a bar, sit down, and just hope that Mr. or Ms. Right will plop themselves down next to you and strike up a conversation? Probably not. After all, you could be there for years. And, let's face it—you might be drunk by the time your true love showed up anyway. Any number of people may come in while you're waiting, but you won't know anything about them and they won't know anything about you. So, aside from the assumptions you can make about the way they dress or what they're drinking, you'd be starting from scratch. Even after a brief conversation, you still probably won't know a lot more. These kinds of interactions are, almost by definition, superficial.

For years, advice columnists have told us that if we want to meet people, we should go *do something*. If we join a running club, we'll meet people with whom we at least have running in common. If we volunteer for Habitat for Humanity, we'll find people who are interested in public service and maybe like working with their hands. If we join a book club . . . well, you get the idea.

The advice that's traditionally been given to lonely hearts is even truer for budding entrepreneurs. You cannot simply wait for the right people to walk into your life or even walk into your office. You have to go out and *do something* to find them. And you have to do something *with* them in order to find out if you've got the right match.

So what are the options? A lot of people try business school. In fact, record numbers of individuals are applying to MBA programs these days. And no wonder; business school allows you to work with other students on projects

## 24 STARTUP WEEKEND

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and see where their talents lie, what interests them, how they work under pressure, and so on. You can stay up late into the night preparing for classes. People's true colors come out. And when you graduate, you have a built-in alumni network to draw on for your later career.

But business school is a big investment. Moreover, getting an MBA takes a lot of time—and time is one thing that entrepreneurs don't have. If you have an idea for a company now—or if what really gets you going in the morning is putting a startup idea in motion—then having to wait around to complete the business school cycle is not for you. Given the need to take the GMAT and undergo the application process, it will most likely be more than a year before you can even get in.

Finally, when it comes to meeting the right people with the right skills for what you want to do right now, business school might not cut it. You may have had good, smart people in your graduating class 10 years ago, but have they kept up? Are they the best developers or the best marketers today? Really, who knows what—and who—they know?

We have also been told that networking in an MBA program is not all it's cracked up to be. Candidates are expected to attend networking events as part of the MBA program. However, most of these events, though technically “professional,” are centered on golf tournaments, picnics, or barbecues. At almost all of them, the emphasis is on talking rather than learning or doing. The more casual events stress the importance of listening to more experienced people talk about their life stories and best practices (many of which are not even relevant today). It can be a very didactic, top-down approach to information sharing.

One Startup Weekend participant told us that while she certainly made some good connections at these

B-school events, “most were lost opportunities in the sense that it was extremely difficult to actually witness the capabilities and skills of the people I was supposed to be meeting. I found a few good mentors, but was continually frustrated by how hard it was to get to know fellow MBA candidates.” She said that the networking events were either designed to resemble cocktail hours—situations where “you only skim the surface with new people or stick to people you already know.”

None of this is meant to knock business school. It is still a place where you may gain important skills for your career. However, it’s simply to say that getting an advanced degree may not be the most efficient route for meeting startup cofounders.

So what about networking on your own—attending functions at a company where you already work, or seeking out other people in your area who might be interested in entrepreneurship?

This can certainly be a helpful career move; there’s no telling whom you will find by putting out some feelers at local business or social events. But that’s exactly the problem: There’s no telling whom you will find. Think about what you would say to someone you just met about your own business credentials. Would you recite your resume? Find the perfect anecdote to illustrate your skills? Can you drop the name of the right mutual acquaintance? Maybe—maybe not. Maybe you will bond over the fact that your brother went to the same college as this person’s sister. But sooner or later, it becomes a lot like trying to find dates on a barstool. What can you find out about the other person and what can he or she find out about you?

Now, think about the business cards you collect at other networking events. Can you even remember which person was which by the time you get home?

Making the right impression on other people at a golf tournament can be an important skill. But it's not important for everyone. For someone in public relations, it's a vital part of the job. But what difference would this make for a developer or a designer or an engineer? As one veteran of a number of startups in the Seattle area likes to say, "Tech folks are not natural networkers." And we don't think they should have to be.

What other people ultimately care about—and really, *should* care about—is the quality of your work. But you can't whip out your laptop (or even your iPad) and, while holding your white wine in one hand and balancing your hors d'oeuvres on your knee, proceed to show someone how you work.

For that, you need to apply the action-based networking principles of Startup Weekend.

### **You *Must* Join a Team**

We at Startup Weekend don't have much in the way of wine or those fancy little quiches. However, by the end of the weekend you will truly understand the skill sets of the people around you—and they will understand yours.

From the easy registration method to the informal Friday night dinner, attendees are expected to talk to one another; and since the only thing they have in common (up until that point) is an interest in entrepreneurship, it is easy to learn about their peers' dreams, ideas, strengths, and weaknesses. When you know that you are supposed to join a team with strangers and work together all weekend, the pressure is on to get to know everyone in the room and to find out what sort of talents surround you.

- Think about the last professional networking event you attended: How many lasting connections did you make?
- Now, think about the last time you participated in an “extra-curricular” group event: How many lasting connections did you make?
- Most likely, your shared interests led to stronger connections and more lasting ties. If you want to begin work on your startup idea, surround yourself with other people who are hoping to do the same!

Friday night is especially intense, because it’s when the team creation happens. Yet, even the long working days of Saturday and Sunday provide ample opportunities to create, build, collaborate, explore, and brainstorm—not only with the members of one’s team, but also with other attendees.

One Startup Weekend participant recalls an event in Vancouver, British Columbia, where teams were required to check in every so often with the entire group. She recounts, “Although it was hard to stop frantically working on our own projects, I loved hearing about what other teams were building and their calls for help. It was so empowering to see [the] brilliant developers, designers, marketers, and project managers that we had in the room . . . it gave me a great excuse to walk up to someone new at Saturday dinner and ask them more about their graphic design experiences.”

Because Startup Weekends combine the dual requirements of teamwork and *proof of concept*, people feel

motivated to show off what they can do and find out what everyone else in the room is capable of. It's fine for someone to brag that they are the world's best developer or a marketing guru. However, when you watch how five other people work together and see the quality of their output for yourself, you build a foundation for future relationships or networks that is so much stronger than the tenuous (and occasionally, meaningless) exchange of business cards at a bar.

We have also found that it is easy for budding entrepreneurs to become cynical. After a while, you can meet a certain number of people who say they can do things but then don't follow through. Many entrepreneurs begin to feel as if they should just go it alone. They assume that others don't share their energy or passion, or don't have the right skill set. One Startup Weekend attendee named Mike Vandembos describes how he has been an entrepreneur since the age of four—when he started selling flower seeds with his older brother, making a three-cent commission on each pack. When he got a little older and more ambitious, he became a paper boy and then started a small engine-repair shop while he was in high school. After that, he began a golf event consulting business.

Looking back, Mike says, his one glaring shortcoming was always his “desire to go it alone”—no more partnerships with the older brother or anyone else. As an adult trying to launch new ventures, Mike realized that the stakes are much higher. He has learned through Startup Weekend that he can “walk with other entrepreneurs.”

Other Startup Weekend participants are well aware that they need partners, but they often don't know where to find them. Jesse Maddox learned what a good networking tool Startup Weekend can be when he returned from a trip to Vietnam with an idea for an application to help

tourists communicate with locals. He recalled watching the exchanges between the two groups and cringing: “Usually when a fruit seller approaches a tourist, the tourist sees him coming and goes into what I call ‘No mode.’ He shakes his head at the fruit seller, saying ‘no’ over and over, and ends up either erupting in frustration or simply ignoring the person.” Needless to say, the entire exchange is a disaster for both parties.

Maddox remembers that after taking a few language lessons with a couple of locals, he was finally able to communicate effectively and politely, thereby avoiding the embarrassing exchange described above. “When the fruit seller approached, I smiled and said ‘No rôì’ (pronounced ‘naw zoi’)—I’m full already.” Maddox was excited when a huge grin came over the vendor’s face; then she laughed and said something back, which he didn’t understand. “It didn’t matter. In just two short syllables, I’d avoided an awkward situation, engaged positively with the local culture, and had a memorable experience myself.”

Maddox came back to his home in Atlanta, Georgia, a few months later with a business plan in hand for helping foreigners learn key local phrases very quickly. The program would include phrases designed for different types of travelers—businessmen, tourists, and so on. One would even offer instruction on flirting in a foreign language. Maddox sent out the idea to a number of friends and acquaintances in the hopes of securing funding. But he heard the same response over and over: Great idea, but we can’t offer you any funding until we see that you’ve put a team together.

“To me, this seemed like the classic chicken-and-egg problem. I couldn’t get a team without investment, and I couldn’t get investment without a team,” Maddox says. His experience illustrates what we think of as one of the biggest

myths about entrepreneurship—that finding capital is the biggest hurdle to putting together a successful venture. However, as Maddox found, the capital was available, but the investors cared about the people. They wanted to know who was going to be on the team. After all, how could they know that this group of people was skilled enough and could work well together if Maddox didn't even know who was going to be working with him?

Finally, one entrepreneur-turned-angel investor suggested that he attend a Startup Weekend to find a team of people.

Maddox managed to get into Atlanta's Startup Weekend at the last minute, only because one of the other weekend participants dropped out—something he now calls a very lucky break. He pitched his “Triplingo” idea (as he called his business) on Friday night, and it was a hit. In fact, it was chosen as one of the top 12 ideas pitched that night. Maddox easily found nine people to work on his team—including a designer, programmers who could work on both web and mobile applications, and marketing talent. As Maddox fondly recalls, “Our team composition allowed us to break our work into different modules. It meant that there was never a point where we had people sitting around with nothing to do.”

Maddox acknowledges that his plan was very ambitious. By the end of the weekend, he wanted a functioning prototype of both the web and iPhone app. To accomplish this in one weekend, the team he attracted to his idea would not only have to be extremely talented; they would have to be highly motivated as well. The group worked through some difficult problems; for example, a bug in the server program they were using held up their progress for several hours, and they were preparing their presentation until the last possible moment. But it paid off in the end. Triplingo was voted

the winner of Startup Weekend Atlanta and it had seed funding to get off the ground within two days. Both CNN and the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* subsequently ran pieces on the company.

Maddox reflects that, “Without Startup Weekend, it might never have happened. Our team would have never formed; I might still be wandering the streets of Atlanta looking for cofounders, and we’d never have our chance to change the way the world travels.” The story of Triplingo illustrates how important it is to create your own team—to get out there and find the right people, and don’t wait for them to find you. Otherwise, you’ll be on that barstool alone all night.

The Triplingo team’s tremendous sense of motivation is not unique. People come to Startup Weekend ready to work. They have set aside this time—away from their jobs, their families, and all of the demands that usually grab our attention. Knowing that the Sunday night deadline is fast approaching turns people into real workhorses.

Tyler Koblasa, the founder of Ming.ly, an application that helps people manage their professional networking, says that he found the perfect team at a Startup Weekend: two Google engineers, a former Hulu vice president, a Georgetown MBA, and a lawyer who also did design work. But it was not just the talent assembled at the meeting that made it such a perfect mix for Koblasa. He might have encountered them all somewhere else, “but they wouldn’t have been in a room ready to work.” Tyler says that his team had “a super-charged, ‘we want to win’ attitude.”

## Breaking Down Barriers

Action-based networking does more than provide entrepreneurs with team members quickly and efficiently. It also

32 STARTUP WEEKEND

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breaks down a lot of the artificial barriers that stand between entrepreneurs. Meeting potential business partners through the traditional routes can mean picking people who look like us, or went to the same schools, or come from the same part of the country or the world. However, we all know that these are arbitrary reasons to hire someone or work with someone.

In a setting like the one presented at Startup Weekend, entrepreneurs use the people who are there. They can't sit around and wait for someone they feel comfortable with in a social situation. They have to find someone they can *work* with, and the sooner, the better.

At Startup Weekend, they get a chance to see *how* people really work, regardless of their backgrounds. For people who may be nervous about working with someone with different personal or professional experience, the action-based networking can also provide a kind of low-risk way of trying it out. As one startup veteran explained to us, building a relationship with a cofounder is like getting into a marriage. You will have to spend long hours with this other person, probably in small, enclosed spaces. Each person's hopes, dreams, and finances will be intertwined with the other person's. Once you get the startup off the ground, it will be hard to get out of the relationship if it doesn't work out.

Startup Weekend is essentially a chance to give this marriage a spin before actually tying the knot. Those 54 hours of work give you a chance to see whether things will work out. And if they don't, nothing is lost. At the end of the weekend, you can just walk away; after all, you haven't bought the wedding gown or paid for the catering yet. As one organizer told us, "By Saturday afternoon, if you realize this person is driving you crazy, you know that it's all going to be over by Sunday night—and you can just walk away."

Another Startup Weekend participant compared his experience to a camping trip he attended in high school designed to get kids socialized; because let's face it—in large groups of strangers, we all tend to act like we're in high school. He says, "Over the years, the teachers had developed a great solution to break down the social barriers: week one was training and prep, and then week two of school was a camping trip (which also satisfied our Phys Ed requirement!). We arrived not knowing each other, but after spending a week hiking, eating, sleeping (and doing everything else) in the woods, it became pretty much impossible to maintain any sort of distance." Looking back, he says, "Forty people won't necessarily all be friends, but we were all close after that week. In the same way, Startup Weekend throws a bunch of strangers together in the wilderness and forces them to work together, social norms be damned."

Another participant named Sasha Pasulka compares Startup Weekend to summer camp. "It's not that anyone [went] sailing, or made a lanyard, or got to second base with me before a counselor came around with a flashlight; but everyone in the room that night bonded intensely in a short period of time." She recalls, "By Saturday morning, I was not in a room full of strangers anymore. By Sunday evening, I was in a room with some of my closest friends in the city." Knowing very few people in the area before that Friday, Sasha says, her professional network "exploded," and "so did my grasp of up-and-coming technologies, markets, and potential teammates." Since that first Startup Weekend, she has worked as a columnist for a startup-focused website, sold a company she launched, and worked as a consultant for other ventures.

Putting people together in environments like the one at Startup Weekend serves a dual purpose. It is a way of mitigating future financial risk, since you'll find out early if your

## 34 STARTUP WEEKEND

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fellow participants are capable of helping you start a venture. It's also a method of ensuring that the startup experience is personally fulfilling. Since 90 percent of startups fail, part of the payoff has to be experience. If you don't enjoy working with your partners, then that experience is bound to be a bad one. If you've worked with them for a weekend, you're in much better shape to evaluate whether you'll have fun working with them in the long term. A few participants build companies that succeed and grow beyond Startup Weekend, and almost every participant finds working relationships, friendships, and sometimes even a cofounder at Startup Weekend.

### **Taking Advantage of High-Energy, Low-Risk Settings**

The low-risk nature of networking at Startup Weekend prompts many people to decide that they can safely expand their horizons in other ways as well. Kyle Kesterson was a toy developer living in Seattle, who didn't think he had anything to learn from Startup Weekend. According to Kesterson, friend and startup veteran Donald DeSantis "described it to me as working with people on building iPhone and web apps and how cool it was, which I just kind of let graze my ears but not sink in too far." Kesterson remembers DeSantis's efforts to convince him to go to a Startup Weekend event: "I made up all sorts of excuses and ended up missing Friday night altogether, thinking I was just going to bail on the whole weekend."

At 1 AM on Saturday, Kesterson remembers getting a call from DeSantis, "sounding like he just outran the cops or something." DeSantis reported that the Startup Weekend experience was amazing but that there were "no designers there and that it didn't matter what my background

was; if I had *any* design skills or eye for aesthetic, I'd be in high demand." DeSantis would not take no for an answer.

So, Saturday morning at 7:30 AM, Kesterson arrived at his first Startup Weekend. He acknowledges that the project he ended up working on sounds a little ridiculous: a virtual pet created to look like John Stamos. This *Tamagotchi*, as this type of digital creature is called, was supposed to be a kind of nostalgia item for people who remember Stamos as Uncle Jesse on the 1980s sitcom *Full House*.

Kesterson remembers sketching the creature and then working on its various features on his computer. Everyone else was working on coding or PowerPoint presentations, so most people would walk by his laptop and be a little surprised.

However, many people were also amused and impressed. By the end of the weekend, Kesterson had a pile of business cards, and a couple of job offers. One person even offered to give his portfolio to the director of creative development at Pixar.

Kesterson's team won the award for business idea most likely to make a million dollars—and to this day, people who attended that weekend still talk about it. More importantly, Kyle had his first taste of life in the startup world. Now, he is the cofounder of a startup called Giant Thinkwell, which builds fan engagement platforms for celebrities and influencers to grow, engage, and monetize their followings through online and mobile experiences. They've moved on from John Stamos to the likes of Lady Gaga. Kesterson is also a graduate of Seattle's TechStars program, an initiative that supports entrepreneurs who demonstrate promise.

Looking back on his experience, Kesterson says, "Starting Giant Thinkwell wasn't even a thought trying to form in my head" before Startup Weekend. He admits that

“I had absolutely no network, insight, or understanding of the startup/tech world. Even if I was motivated to start a company that [went anywhere] beyond my freelance design and illustration, I wouldn’t have the first clue on how to put together an investor pitch deck, who to talk to, what to take into account when forming a team. I was absolutely green, naïve, and alone.”

Just like you used to write rough drafts of papers in school, spending meaningful time on a startup rough draft isn’t a waste of time. Creating “rough drafts” at high-energy, low-risk collaborative events helps identify and strengthen weaknesses. Think of it as a dress rehearsal for your startup!

The action-based networking that he found at Startup Weekend provided Kesterson with not only a great list of new contacts and a lot more knowledge of the startup world; it also placed him in an energetic world of motivated people. “Startup Weekend was like a *Pulp Fiction* shot of adrenaline to the heart,” he says. As a character designer, he can’t resist a cartoon comparison; and he says he felt the same way Little Foot did in *The Land Before Time* when he finally made it to the Great Valley. Kesterson explains: “It instantly made my previous world feel so primitive and out of the loop. People at Startup Weekend were so high on the rush of creativity and productivity and eager to collaborate.”

Getting the chance to meet all of these people from other fields was something that Kesterson says didn’t happen for him in school or in his day job as a toy designer. Startup Weekend introduced him to “people on one end of

the spectrum from Microsoft and Google,” as well as to those whom Kyle thinks of as being from a “sterile business-to-business environment.” He explains that while he doesn’t really fit into that world either, the people who came from those other types of environments “had really interesting ideas about what collaboration with someone with my skill set could look like.”

In fact, many of the people who attend Startup Weekends work at larger companies. While they may feel as though they have unlimited resources where they are, that can be paralyzing in a way—because they start to believe that they need all those resources in order to start up a new company. But they don’t. That’s exactly why it can be very beneficial for them to network with veterans of startups and work alongside people who have the courage to engage in this process.

Kesterson found people at Startup Weekend who were highly polished, and some who were not; he found people who were into social gaming and some who were definitely not. “It was just this huge array, but it all had to do with technology and flourishing ideas. And everyone is really excited and really open and generous with their ideas.” He says that this kind of openness is something he hadn’t encountered before. “This wasn’t heavily guarded brilliance”; this was people “just wanting to get as much feedback as they can and really digging. And that digging included finding out what ideas you might have.”

Kesterson says that when he was in school, he imagined that some day he might be successful enough to become a freelance designer, but even in that case, he would just be working out the designs for someone else’s ideas. He never dreamed that he could have his own company where he came up with the concepts for what he was designing, too.

Kesterson's educational experience prior to coming to Startup Weekend (which, if anything, was strictly limited to his talents) is not unique—and this is not only an American educational phenomenon. Thibaut Labarre, another Startup Weekend participant, explains that in his experience at the French *Grand Ecoles d'Ingénieurs*, “which are supposed to teach the best and brightest scientists and engineers,” he was not exposed to people from other fields or people who had great entrepreneurial ideas. However, at a Paris Startup Weekend, Labarre and his team developed a website where people could share their insights about what was going to happen in the future. “The goal,” he explains, “was to bring all brains together in order to have the best forecasts about what is going to happen.” Labarre says he would like to make a course modeled on Startup Weekend a part of the curriculum at his university. “Startup Weekend gave me the startup spirit and the feeling that anything is possible when people from different backgrounds work together for a common cause.”

### Get Out of Your Bubble

Entrepreneurs have to be different from people who work for large companies. They can't just sit in their cubicle and interact with other people who do exactly what they do or have the same training they do. As a startup veteran and evangelizer for entrepreneurial networking, Bob Crimmins points out, “The most important relationships you have as an entrepreneur are with people who *don't* do what you do.”

Entrepreneurs have to act like CEOs, only with a more hands-on approach. They have to know a little bit about every aspect of business. It's not that they have to be able to step in for the coders if the coders call in sick that day, but they do have to know what is involved in coding. They

must develop a sense of how long things take and how the work gets done. However, our day-to-day interactions often don't provide us with the opportunity to see how our colleagues in other departments do their work. Getting out of the bubble of your own field is critical to being a successful entrepreneur. As we discuss later, Startup Weekend has allowed entrepreneurs to be able to look at the entire workflow and see how the whole process can be made better and more efficient.

Many of the project leaders at Startup Weekend like to be modest and say they just bought the coffee in the morning and the beer at night and it was really their team that did all the work. However, that's rarely the case. Keeping the team on an even keel, matching up individual skills with a particular element of the project, and ensuring that people are getting along and having fun while work is accomplished are important parts of being a startup founder. And the action-based networking at Startup Weekend gives budding entrepreneurs a chance to try out these roles.

And not all of the networking that happens is with your own team, either. One Startup Weekend participant, Alexa Andrzejewski, founded a company called Foodspotting, a social networking application that allows users to post pictures of and recommend their favorite dishes (not just their favorite restaurants.) Alexa describes how she came to the event with an idea in mind but didn't plan to fully develop it that weekend. Instead, she claimed a section of a blank wall and started to put up post-it notes with her team members that had design ideas written all over them. As Andrzejewski explains, "We wanted to brainstorm in a really visible way." And it worked beautifully; other SW participants would walk by and ask questions or make suggestions. "We talked to someone who did market research about how we could do research with restaurants to help Foodspotting [improve],

## Half Baked

Half Baked is a great ice breaker that encourages Startup Weekend participants to relax, meet fellow attendees, practice pitching, and remember that we're all here to have fun. The half baked startup ideas encourage people to think creatively and can be adapted to many different situations.

- 1 Fill half a large whiteboard with all the random words you can think of: giraffe, banana, squishy, volcano, Big Foot, exploding, flying saucer, slippers, purple, Zeus, petunia . . .
- 2 Encourage the entire group to shout out more random words until the whiteboard is full.
- 3 Count off the group into roughly equal teams (six people per team seems to be the magic number). We like to divide people up so every seventh person is on the same team—that way even groups of friends are forced to split up and meet new people.
- 4 Each team has to choose two words from the board. These words are now the name of a startup. It's first come, first served for the word pairings and a word cannot be used twice. (For example, Team 4 chooses Exploding Banana so Team 7 must go from Squishy Banana to Squishy Slippers.)
- 5 Once they've chosen their words, the teams have 10 minutes to prepare a 1-minute presentation that explains their startup idea to the group (props and skits are welcome!).
- 6 In a random order, each team presents their brand new startup idea. Example: "We're Team 4 and we'd like to introduce you to Exploding Banana. We all know that kids don't always eat enough fruit and we feel that it's because fruit is boring. So how can parents make their kids want to eat fruit? By serving them safe but fun Exploding Bananas, of course! . . ."
- 7 The winning group is determined by the Applause-o-Meter and bragging rights are awarded.

\*Startup Weekend would like to thank Dave McClure for introducing us to Half Baked.

and we talked to a lawyer who told us what's involved in actually starting up a company.”



Andrzejewski got to pitch her idea over and over again to dozens of people, and receive valuable feedback along the way. By the time she left on Sunday, she had a much better idea of how to make her concept work effectively—and she had gotten *a lot* of practice selling the idea to potential users. Though Alexa didn't find the rest of her team at Startup Weekend, the connections she made there eventually granted her access to some initial funding for her venture.

Another Startup Weekend participant in Grand Rapids, Michigan, worked on a project called Rethink Water, which aims to reduce the waste created by plastic water bottles by installing water filtration machines on college campuses. He recalls of his teammates: “Our instant friendship, as well as their passion for the project and our common interests in bringing not only the Rethink Water project but other ideas on the table to market, served to fuel our energy throughout the weekend and to this day.”

42 STARTUP WEEKEND

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Like Alexa, this entrepreneur told us that it wasn't just the people on his own team who helped. "The collaborative and open nature of the weekend was an aspect I thoroughly enjoyed." He was impressed with the way "everyone was willing to share their work and help others with theirs. We could be wrestling with an issue one moment, when someone from another team would stop by, take a look, and offer other creative alternatives."

There are many examples in everyday life when we rely on our friends' feedback: going shopping, choosing paint colors, planning a vacation, relationship advice—the list goes on and on. Given how important feedback is, don't neglect outside perspectives when building your startup!

Another woman came to Startup Weekend with the idea of doing something similar to Groupon, but gearing it solely toward women—that is, offering deals on products or services in which women would be interested. As with Groupon, the deal would only go through if enough people signed up for it. So, she assembled a team and sent out messages to all of the Startup Weekend participants asking for their feedback. They ended up changing their model during the course of the weekend to include the idea that a portion of the money was to be given to particular charities, and that they were going to let businesses keep a higher portion of the profits than Groupon gives them. It was a great business model by Sunday, but thanks to all the feedback they got from fellow Startup Weekend participants, it didn't look much like what they started with on Friday night.

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## If Not an Actual Startup, at Least Always Build Relationships

Startup Weekend has begun to attract investors and startup veterans to its events, people who want to see what (or, more importantly, who) is the *next big thing*. The world of startup funding can be complicated. Knowing the right people to ask, the right amount of money to ask for, pitching your idea correctly—these are all things about which someone just out of college or who has spent years working for a software firm might not have the slightest idea.

Investors are often bombarded with proposals for new business ideas. How can they know who will follow through? First-time entrepreneurs with no prior track record will have difficulty getting their proposals to the top of the pile. But Startup Weekend allows investors to watch the development of an idea from a pitch on Friday night (a twinkle in the founder's eye) to a real business model—and sometimes even a real business—by Sunday night. Even if an investor doesn't fund that idea, he may find a person he would be willing to back in the future.

Or, the reverse may occur. Danielle Siau attended a Startup Weekend in Singapore where she pitched her idea for FashionSpace—basically, a site with racks of user-generated fashion magazines, a *Facebook for fashion* or a fashion aggregator and search engine rolled into one. As it turns out, her idea was not very popular among her fellow Startup Weekend participants and didn't get selected for further work. However, her pitch caught the attention of an angel investor. In short order, Siau says, "I quit my dreary job and found new life in my new startup with the help of Startup Weekend. I am finally able to fulfill my dreams of being an entrepreneur."

44 STARTUP WEEKEND

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Donald DeSantis, a veteran of a number of startups in the Seattle area, was attending a Startup Weekend in Costa Rica when he met one of the participants, a young man who had his own fledgling startup. Though it wasn't the project he ended up working on over the weekend, DeSantis proceeded to introduce the man to a number of the judges. The participant told them about his own business and eventually was promised some funding for it. As DeSantis relates, the man told him, "I didn't have any relationships with investors. In Costa Rica, it takes a long time to make those relationships, and there is a lot of red tape and greasing of palms. You just completely short-circuited the process for me."

Former Executive Director of the Northwest Entrepreneur Network, Rebecca Lovell has come to a number of Startup Weekends to offer the investor perspective. She recommends that Startup Weekend participants try to meet the judges and other guest speakers who are at the events. Lovell likens attending Startup Weekend to "having a passport that lasts a weekend. You need to take advantage of the time there to make strong connections." She says that many of the investors there are "naturally predisposed to help, but they're very, very busy." So, you have to make an impression on them during the weekend. You can't just hand someone your business card; you must engage them and create a genuine connection.

It helps that the judges and potential investors at Startup Weekend can see what participants are capable of doing—even if the idea that attendees work on over the weekend is not the one on which they ultimately hope to follow through. In fact, we think that budding entrepreneurs tend to be *too* focused on their actual ideas. We believe that it's the *people* who will make or break the venture, not the idea. As we said before, ideas are a dime a

dozen. That is what makes the action-based networking at Startup Weekend so important. Those who attend will meet the people who can eventually determine a venture's success. Lovell also warns entrepreneurs against concentrating too much on their ideas, or thinking of Startup Weekend merely as a place to go to find people to do some free weekend work on their idea. "When people are married to an idea, it can go horribly wrong," she says.

One of our facilitators, who has worked with other startup mentorship programs like Y-Combinator, says that these types of programs pick companies to support based on the people who comprise the teams, and expect that the ideas will change along the way. "As a facilitator, I look for attendees on the sidelines Friday night who are struggling to figure out what team to join or [who] feel discouraged because their idea wasn't picked. I tell them to just talk to the teams and join one with people who seem fun."

### **Diversity of Backgrounds Is Key**

Action-based networking is not only important to individual entrepreneurs; it's also vital to the process of establishing an infrastructure of startups in a particular place. In cities like New York or London, entrepreneurship may seem like old hat. But there are plenty of entrepreneurs around the country and the world who need an effective way of connecting with cofounders and colleagues—people who share that startup spirit. The kind of work that goes on at Startup Weekend allows people to form strong bonds that eventually grow into a community. Typically, Startup Weekend organizers have a lot of contacts in their startup, business, and/or tech communities. So, even though the barrier to entry may seem low, the events often turn out to

be composed of a very highly motivated and connected group of participants.

And Startup Weekend's international outreach has meant that entrepreneurs looking to expand their horizons have a resource for finding like-minded people all over the globe. One Startup Weekend participant launched a company that provided beach lockers and electronic locker solutions in Portugal. She wanted to expand to France, but she realized she couldn't do it alone. So she came to a Startup Weekend in Toulouse and met "highly motivated people with diverse backgrounds" who helped her develop the plans for how to proceed in other countries.

The diversity of individual backgrounds is critical to Startup Weekend's success, and is necessary for assembling the right entrepreneurial teams. Eric Lagier is the founder of Memolane, a tool for collecting and organizing photos, music, video, tweets, status updates, and blogs—an all-in-one application. Of the two cofounders whom he met at a Startup Weekend in Copenhagen, he shares that one had very little in the way of formal education, while the other one had two masters' degrees. They were from different countries—his original team included people from Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Denmark—and Eric is convinced that "under normal circumstances, we never would have met." He also marvels at the range of ages he found at Startup Weekend—from 20-year-olds to people who already had long careers in the corporate world under their belts.

At the very least, Eric says he could have spent six months trying to assemble not only a team with the right variety of skills but who also had a willingness to work with him on his project. "Those guys could have spent their weekend drinking and partying and whatnot. But they decided to spend it at Startup Weekend instead."

And it was not only his own team that came together like this; Eric has watched others, too. He speaks of one business development marketer who met a project manager with whom he created a successful startup. Looking back, Eric said that “a lot of energy was unleashed” when the two of them worked together.

Alexa Andrsejewski said she had a similar experience of finding a wide array of people at Startup Weekend. “I was a user-experience consultant,” she says, “and I looked around at my network and realized that everyone I knew was also a user-experience person, which meant that all the people she knew could only fill one of the roles at Foodspotting. Alexa didn’t know any investors or developers; as she half-jokes, “They go to developer camps, and things like that.” One of the reasons she came to Startup Weekend was for “cross-pollination.” Though Foodspotting didn’t win the competition that weekend, one of the judges offered to give her team \$5,000 after the competition was over—and subsequently provided a lot of advice about getting further funding.

### **How Do You Keep the Momentum Going?**

One question we constantly ask ourselves is how to make Startup Weekend’s atmosphere last in a community, even after the weekend is over. We don’t think it’s a coincidence that many of our participants are developing applications and programs that help people stay in touch and put like-minded people in contact with each other. The trend toward coworking spaces is an important development. The idea of people doing projects alongside each other, in person and in real time, will continue to encourage the kind of contact and action-based networking that begins at Startup Weekend.

When Tyler Koblasa noticed that something called “Coloft” opened up in Los Angeles, he suggested doing a Startup Weekend event there. “People know that they’re going to be around this community and can find what they’re looking for.” Coworking spaces, he says, “are a critical component of catalyzing Startup Weekend because it becomes not just about those three days. It’s about everything leading up to the event and what happens afterward.” Tyler has even started sponsoring a monthly event there where people pay \$10 to come work on a project from 7 PM to 2 AM for one evening with other attendees. “We want to [establish both] a feeder to Startup Weekend, and a support network afterward.”

Action-based networking is an intensely local phenomenon. Not only do you need to be able to see people and talk to them; you need to be with them for hours, if not days, at a time. But that kind of local networking can also be expanded. There are people who come from out of town for our events and people who meet their cofounders and investors and colleagues through our extensive national and international network. You can take the knowledge you gain from other people at Startup Weekends and transform something local into something global.

For the past couple of years, a number of Startup Weekend team members have gone to the South by Southwest (SXSW) Festival in Austin, Texas. SXSW is not just a good place for us to meet energetic, independent-minded people. It’s also an excellent model for Startup Weekend. If you think about it, people who make music or produce art or movies may attend cocktail parties or go to film school together. However, an event like SXSW or the Sundance Festival truly shows them what they are capable of doing. People come to those events with the knowledge that they will be able to see talent in action. The effects of

South by Southwest reverberate for the rest of the year in both the United States and in the global music industry.

As unique and intense as the Startup Weekend experience is, we also think it has broader, long-term implications. As people take the lessons of Startup Weekend and apply them in their own communities and spread them throughout a variety of places and industries, we hope they will become an integral part of an entrepreneurial revolution.

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