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EDITORIAL

Coping with the cross traffic

At the end of May, on a drive along the Mediterranean coast from Barcelona, Spain, to Provence, France, I spent one night at Hotel de la Plage in Banyules Sur Mer on the French side of the Costa Brava. The hotel is separated from the beach by a busy coastal highway. As I was about to sit in the dining room on the inland side of the road, the waiter guided me to a beachside dining area. Gradually the space filled up and, in a period of about two hours, this one waiter served three-course meals to twelve tables with an average of about three guests per table, ferrying all the food and drink through hectic two-way traffic. He even found time to laugh and talk with his customers. The hotel owner, as unflappable as the waiter, floated in and out of the inland establishment, chatting with pedestrians and yelling at friends who drove by in their cars. An attractive young woman, who could have been the owner's wife, drifted back and forth across the street and sometimes carried food.

Other restaurants in the area had customers, but few were as busy. This restaurant had what I consider the infallible formula for success: great location, great product, great price, great customer service, and that often overlooked ingredient—the ability to cope with the cross traffic.

Howard Fein, having worked for many years in the defense industry, saw the potential for holographic interferometry (“Holographic interferometry: Nondestructive tool,” page 37). He started his own business, battling to educate potential clients that this mature but little understood technology

could solve their problems. Dirk Basting and Heinrich Endert were Ph.D. students when they came up with the core technology for a new business in 1969 (“Excimer lasers for industrial microprocessing,” page 40). They battled cross traffic in an industry that thought excimer lasers were a scientific curiosity, but they gradually gained acceptance. Today, Lambda Physik has offices in Germany, the U.S. and Japan, and has managed to double its pre-tax profits in the last two years.

Sometimes the roar of the traffic drowns out even a great idea and you have to relocate. When W. Edwards Deming tried to disseminate his management ideas in the U.S., they were considered too radical and were rejected. In Japan, his ideas were embraced by a group of industries, and they have been credited as the underlying principles that have turned Japan into a world economic power (“Physicist transformed the quality of management,” page 46).

Physicists are good at coming up with new ideas, they are trained to solve complex problems, and their independent thinking makes them good entrepreneurial candidates. Look at how many have already slipped into business (“Find the hidden physicist,” page 52). Starting a business isn't for everyone, but if you are so driven, remember the basics; good idea, good pricing, good service, good marketing. But above all, be prepared to cope with the cross traffic.

Ken McNaughton
Associate Publisher



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