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The Shoe Laundry

Written by [Levine Lawrence](#)

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This is a business which is virtually out of the box and yet it is shockingly simple and a down to earth concept. Can anybody make a profitable business of cleaning and repairing someone's shoes... Sandeep Gajakas did not bother about any venture capitalist or a banker to get convinced about the idea. He just pulled out his own savings and went ahead establishing 'The Shoe Laundry' in Mumbai, the first ever venture of its kind in India. In fact, from 2003 to 2006, he did not have an office!

Speaking at the Out Of Box Conference on the challenges of entrepreneurship,



29-year-old Sandeep Gajakas narrated the evolution of his concept. "While studying in Mithibhai College in Mumbai, I had a lot of well-to-do classmates, who were not bothered about their dirty shoes. Challenged by a friend, I cleaned his shoes and gave it to him in impeccable condition. Then I wondered why people cannot make an effort to clean their shoes... If they expect someone else to do it for them, then it is certainly a feasible business

model.

But later I was caught up in the rat race and took jobs like fashion choreographer, event manager and even a club-level football player. Later while working for Carrier Aircon and a call center accumulated rich experience of dealing with customers. Then the idea came back to me and I decided I need to carve a niche of my own. If cleaning shoes gives utmost joy and also brings in a decent remuneration, then so be it. But convincing my father about this business idea was rather a tough task.

So without much support, I started on my own; using my bedroom as the workshop. I was inspired by Abdul Kalam's book 'Igniting Minds' and wanted to prove my idea to the world. I got my first advertising campaign done through friends and marketing campaign developed and executed by myself. In the beginning, I was handling delivery, cleaning and billing all by myself. Instead of confessing to people that I don't have hands to help, I used to say "our delivery boy is in a different area right now, so I will come and pick up your shoes!"

Most of the deliveries I did myself since I loved to see the expression of my customers when they received their shoes. I have seen situations where customers refused to believe that they are their own shoes, since they did not



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expect them to be so clean. It is the customer's happiness that has pushed me into continuing this business and expanding it.

In Mumbai, where shoes are exposed to varied climatic conditions and dust, The Shoe Laundry is obviously a service in need. Moderately priced at Rs. 120 for a pair of shoes, the charges include pick-up from the client's door-step, thorough washing and drying, replacement of worn-out laces, repairs and touch-ups to cover-up any other repair. Ours is a completely service oriented business, so when my delivery boys do the job, I always ask whether the customer smiled to see their refurbished shoes. We have delivered shoes at 2am for call centre employees.

From the beginning, I adopted the doorstep delivery model since I could not afford the real estate cost of having an office. Working from my bedroom, I later moved my workshop to our ancestral property in Sion.

While I was catering to mainly retail customers, a Shoppers Stop customer who got the after sales service from me, insisted with the shop's management to hand over regular servicing work to The Shoe Laundry. Soon we were handling shoes from all the leading showrooms, hospitals and star hotels in city. Today The Shoe Laundry caters to Adidas, Reebok, Nike showrooms and has completely taken up their after sales service. Earlier these top brands were being forced to replace shoes of a customer having a defective product. Now with the impeccable quality of repair assured by The Shoe Laundry, their replacements have come down 90%.

Eight competitors came into the business but couldn't sustain themselves due to the high service factor and tight margins. As of now, we are managing with a 30-40% profit margin; handling 50-60 shoes per day. Nine well trained boys follow my ten-step cleaning procedure which involves everything from tagging to drying and even repairs." So it seems the journey of a thousand miles begins with a step and squeaky clean shoes!! n

Contact him at sandeep@shoelaundry.com

The Virtual School Bridges The Digital Divide

Whenever there is a talk about Indian economic growth, the discussion turns towards the widening urban-rural gap in basic infrastructure. Thankfully the digital divide issue is getting resolved in one corner atleast owing to an experiment happening across India's rural countryside. Quality education for deprived rural students is an issue that the government has been trying to address for ages. However, sometimes it seems a simple solution can solve the biggest of our socio-economic problems.

An innovative experiment is happening in Lucknow, Pune and Bangalore to bring



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quality education to under privileged schools. A class taught by skilled teachers in private schools is digitally recorded, made into a DVD and sent to the under privileged schools.

This project of digitally transmitting classes to under privileged is named **Digital Study Hall (DSH)** and was initiated by **Dr Urvashi Sahni**, President of Study Hall Educational Foundation and **Randy Wang**, former assistant professor of Princeton University. Randy Wang is now researcher at Microsoft Research who is working full time on the DSH project.

The Digital Study Hall project was launched in Lucknow in 2005 to take a in-depth insight into the teaching problem. Student teacher ratios in rural schools can reach up to 100:1. Even the teachers present are often not up to the mark, especially in English and Science. This project evolved a form of distance education where the postal system is to be used as a medium for the delivery of video lectures. These are recorded in the classrooms of reputed urban teachers and viewed in the village, mediated by a local teacher, who pauses the video at appropriate times to encourage discussion. The facilitating teacher need not be an expert, rather someone who can instigate the interaction.

Speaking about the concept, Wang says, "Initially we had the simple idea of recording classes in the privileged schools and send the videos to the deprived schools. But things turned out to be much more complicated than we thought. The privileged schools had CBSE board education in English language and the children came from upper middle class or upper class background. On the other hand, the deprived school children came from lower middle class or lower class and studied state board education with little knowledge of English. Then we tried the idea of recording the afternoon schools in urban slums and sending the videos to village schools. But that idea did not work since the teaching was of poor quality. So after a lot of experimentation, we managed to get CBSE teachers to teach the afternoon school children and then used those videos for the village schools. This way we got the best of both good teachers as well the right audience."

Soon DSH evolved into a 'Hub and Spoke' model where the selected privileged schools in each city became the hubs that generated content for education for the spokes or the deprived schools in the nearby villages. Variations of this approach is carried out in other cities like Pune and Bangalore.

Wang narrated, "In Bangalore, we are trying to do something different, since the education quality in south India is much better. Harokantnahalli outside Bangalore is the hub for these activities and children in the surrounding villages are benefited. Here we select the outstanding teacher in that particular region and record their teaching session for the schools in the neighboring villages. This has brought in immense competition among teachers since they love to share their knowledge to a larger audience. It has sort of become the village equivalent of 'Indian Idol' contest for school teachers!"

The project also works on 'peer teaching' where the brightest fellow students are asked to serve as mediators during periods when the local teachers are absent, which are common occurrences in government schools in India. Apart from child education, DSH has also recorded a session on organic farming for the agricultural extension program.

Talking about the quality of the recorded teaching, Wang says, "We involved the private schools who are already doing outreach programs, so that they are enthusiastic about this project. Principals are made responsible as the quality gatekeepers of each recorded session."

It is heart warming to see that a profit minded IT giant like Microsoft is helping

teachers to communicate with under privileged children. But we have to see whether the government will take notice of this novel project or will private players enter into the scene looking for a profit motive!

These were excerpts from the 'Out of Box Conference' held in Bangalore recently.

Compiled by our Roving Reporter Levine Lawrence

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