Lesson 6 Case Studies

Real Life Examples of Innovation in Social Enterprising

The PIRGs and the Fund for Public Interest

In the 1970s, advocacy organizations focused on consumer and environmental protection, known as the PIRGs (Public Interest Research Groups), began operating in a handful of states nationwide. Like many other grassroots organizations today, these organizations generated the majority of their operating revenue through individual donations solicited via door-to-door canvassing. Each day of the week except Sunday, canvassing crews actively engage with citizens through one-on-one conversations across their designated regions.

These interactions result in donations, which is only one of the many benefits of this development strategy. Canvassing is an effective way to deliver and spread a message—educating citizens, residents, and consumers, inspiring action, and building political influence to pass legislation. For example, telling an elected official that 1,000 voters in their district have contributed financially to a cause demonstrates strong public support and carries significant weight.

In addition to raising funds through "the canvass," many state PIRGs have *student chapters* at college campuses in their states. Students in these chapters organize events and projects such as voter registration drives, campaigns to lower the price of tuition and textbooks, and others that support statewide efforts to protect consumers and the environment. The student chapters are funded through an optional fee of approximately $10 per semester, which is added to each student's tuition bill. Every four years, the student body votes on whether to continue this funding practice.

In 1982, the network of PIRGs nationwide formed an organization called Fund for the Public Interest (The Fund). One of The Fund's initiatives was to package what may be the most important core competency of the PIRGs - the canvass - and contract with affinity organizations to set up and operate their canvasses. In doing so, through this innovative approach, The Fund accomplished two important tasks: (1) They helped improve the self-sufficiency (by generating a new source of reliable revenue) and effectiveness (as noted, paid members = political clout) of like-minded environmental organizations, and; (2) by essentially *franchising* their model for generating operating revenue through the canvass and charging a reasonable fee for this service, creating new source of sustainable revenue for themselves.

- What did this organization do that was innovative?
- What core competencies did it leverage?
- How have, or will, these innovations helped this organization to be more self-sufficient?

Saunderstown Garlic Farm

Saunderstown Garlic Farm (SGF) is the largest organic garlic farm in Rhode Island—though, given the state's size, that's a humble distinction! Compared to garlic farms in the Central Valley of California, which can span thousands of acres, SGF's 1-acre farm is modest. The farm produced about 1,200 pounds of garlic last year, which was all sold online and at farmers' markets. On average, the farm attended only one market per week. In addition to selling fresh garlic, SGF began offering dehydrated garlic in spice grinders last season, allowing customers to enjoy the product year-round. The high demand for this "value-added" product has opened up a new marketing avenue for the farm, enabling it to process garlic for long-term storage and sale.

After three seasons of selling commercially, SGF has established a strong presence at local farmers markets and, more importantly, has learned how to market its products effectively. As a result, the future growth of the farm is now limited by its production capacity. SGF practices sustainable/regenerative farming practices and only grows garlic on half of its field space per season. To allow the soil time to recover by adding nutrients and biomass, a cover crop is planted between garlic harvests.

The farming community in Rhode Island is tight-knit, and SGF collaborates with other area farms by sharing tools, knowledge, and ideas in any way possible. Many other farms in the area use organic farming methods if they are not certified organic. However, no other farms grow as much garlic as SGF, despite the fact that SGF is much smaller and has demonstrated how profitable garlic can be.

Based on data from the past market season, it would be profitable for the farm to expand to other markets - perhaps 1 to 2 others that have a different customer base. Alas, how could the farm accomplish this without any additional space on their farm?

- What did this organization do that was innovative?
- What core competencies did it leverage?
- How could this business further evolve its business model to generate more revenue despite the small footprint of the farm?