



Business is brewing for these teens in New York City.

Mind Your Own Business

A group of New York teens gets a head start on becoming entrepreneurs with a unique summer camp experience.

By Melissa Daly

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD PLITT

On a late-summer Friday in downtown New York City, a cool little coffee shop on a bustling side street closed its doors for good. It had a great run—two whole days open for business. As the register and tips were tallied and the decorations carefully stripped from the walls, its creators slapped one another on the back, congratulating themselves for their wildly successful venture.

True, shutting down after two days of operation isn't normally cause for celebration in the business world. But this business was special: It was launched by nine teenagers enrolled in Teen Entrepreneur Boot Camp, a two-week learning experience in which students design a real-life café from scratch and actually run it for two days—real customers, real coffee. No play money here. The purpose, says Pam Chmiel, cofounder of the New York City-based nonprofit program, is to help young people pick up the hard skills and the self-starter, go-get-'em attitudes becoming more and more important for future career success.

Entrepreneurial Minds

In a recent Gallup survey, more than 95 percent of employers and employees said they believed American workers need to be more entrepreneurial in order for the country to keep up in the global economy. But what does that mean? Entrepreneurship is defined as “taking the initiative and assuming risk to create value for a company or business, either as an owner of your own business or in your place of work,” according to Junior Achievement USA, an organization dedicated to preparing kids to do just that. The best time to learn how is when you're young and naturally drawn to question the status quo, say experts. Even President Barack Obama noted that entrepreneurship is a “21st-century skill” that's equally—if not more—important than “whether students can fill in a bubble on a test.”

In a down economy (as the U.S. and much of the world is in now), having these skills carries a bonus. “In 35 years of surveying teens, the number who say they want to start their own business someday has never been so high,” says Jack Kosakowski, president of Junior Achievement USA. His group’s 2009 Teens and Entrepreneurship Survey revealed that 51 percent of teens would like to start their own businesses someday. “After seeing their parents work and work only to get laid off, they’re telling us they’d rather control their own destiny and career path.”

Of course, plenty of students still have their sights set on other professions, such as medicine, journalism, or education. Regardless of what career people choose, learning how to find creative solutions to problems facing

The teens thought through every aspect of the business, from marketing to menu. They even found a way to make a little extra money!

your customers or your boss is still key to becoming a star at work. “The types of jobs that existed in the past where people just went in like robots and performed tasks are becoming fewer and fewer. Jobs of the future require analytical thinking skills and problem solving,” says Kosakowski. “These are part of a cross-functional set of skills that you’ll need no matter what field you go into.”

In launching their mini start-up, the coffee shop Boot Camp kids learned those skills. Here’s how.



Creative Problem Solving

On day one of camp, the students canvassed the neighborhood, looking for businesses they might be able to cross-market with (that is, work with to promote one another’s products). The students also looked at competitors such as Starbucks, Dunkin’ Donuts, and a nearby Italian gourmet shop. What kind of experience could their shop offer local customers that they weren’t already getting from these businesses? The teens brainstormed and came up with the hook that would set them apart: a rock-and-roll-themed coffee bar. They decided to call it Mötley Brüe.

They were off to a good start. “Anybody interested in entrepreneurship should go through their daily life thinking about how things could be done better,” suggests Kosakowski. “Try putting on a different lens as you look at the world around you.”

Resourcefulness

Each Boot Camp session team is given \$1,000 as a budget for supplies, decor, and anything else it might need. Mötley Brüe’s founders soon learned that 1,000 bucks doesn’t go very far. To really trick out their space and draw in customers, they would need outside help.

Chmiel suggested asking the people in charge of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle exhibit that had recently been held near the coffee shop to lend one of their bikes as a prop. Another recommendation was to talk with the J&R Electronics store a few blocks away about a possible cross-promotion. “My family has replicas of all the guitars the Beatles ever played,” threw out camper Ian Irlander, 17. The idea blossomed: By opening day, all the Boot Camp teens who had access to guitars had brought them in and



Top left: Pam Chmiel is the cofounder of Teen Entrepreneur Boot Camp. Above: Ozie Owens (who came from Chicago to attend the program) works the crowd outside the store to draw customers in. Left: Here comes the cherry limeade! Samantha Wahi mixes up a batch of the popular drink.

hung them on the exposed brick walls of the café like an art installation—and Ian’s father’s band, the Blues Brokers, played a pro bono gig.

Risk Taking

Teens are always being told to avoid risky behavior. But it’s not always a bad thing. “Having an idea is great, but if you don’t implement it, you’re just a creative thinker. An entrepreneur, on the other hand, is somebody who’s actually willing to take the risk to get the resources to implement the idea,” explains Kosakowski. In the end, you’ll win some and you’ll lose some—for example, the Harley and J&R ideas didn’t pan out, but they did prompt the discussion that led to a winning idea.

On a more basic level, part of the Brüe crew was stationed outside the café on opening day on official risk-taking detail: reaching out to passersby to get them to stop for a beverage. “At first we didn’t know how to get people to come in,” says Erol Danon, 15.

Perhaps the biggest message campers took home after their two weeks as business owners: You can do it.

After a lot of “sorry, I’m late for work” responses, the teens figured out their prime targets: people who were smiling, walking slowly, and loitering. Soon enough, the line inside was four or five people deep. “I’m not afraid to go out there and have some people ignore me,” Erol notes. “You have to be annoying to get the business!”

Initiative

Perhaps the biggest message campers took home after their two weeks as business owners: You can do it. Take Tiyanna Reabes-Bey, 16. She felt that Mötley Brüe’s menu was a bit boring,

so she suggested they add a cherry limeade drink. She then found a recipe and mixed up a batch.

“Last session they just had iced tea, but I thought we should do something special,” she says. “It’s turned out to be a big seller.”

Teens often think that things happen to them, rather than believing that they can make things happen, says Kosakowski. But, he notes, “it’s important to learn to take charge, both in your life and in the projects you get involved in.” Some of that is the result of confidence and technical skills, but a lot of it just comes from experience, he adds: It’s the kids who grew up running the lemonade—or cherry limeade—stands who are the most likely to succeed down the road.

The Mötley Brüe crew is most likely well on their way. **CW**

? **THINK ABOUT IT**
Imagine you are faced with the same task of opening your own coffee shop. What would you do to make it a success?

For more information, go to www.teenentrepreneurbootcamp.org.