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RAW Travel only began life in late 2006, but because of extensive research, planning and receiving solid advice, it launched itself with a flying start and is already well on its way to break-even, expansion and profit.

The small Sandringham-based business is the creation of experienced travel operator David Reynolds and long time stockbroker Mike Howell. Both share a passion for adventure travel and for doing work that can make a difference among less fortunate communities.

However, passion and vision only go so far when starting your own business. It was small business expertise that they needed to give them the confidence to leave their secure jobs with well known company Intrepid Travel and branch-out on their own. It was the Victorian Government's Small Business Counselling Service and in particular its tourism mentor, Judy Vanrenen, who provided that missing expertise.

David had emigrated from the U.K., where he had been heavily involved in leading and organising 'Charity Challenges'— the concept of charities raising funds for their work whilst providing a life affirming and educational experience for the supporters through a physical challenge.

They are designed to push people out of their comfort zones with inspiring adventures such as cycling through Vietnam or Cambodia, walking the Great Wall or helping out with a local community project. The events are about personal achievement, discovery and above all making a difference.

In 2002 David introduced the concept to Intrepid Travel, who then incorporated 'Charity Challenges' as a separate trip style within the Intrepid structure. Mike Howell joined him shortly after, having recently arrived in Australia after an overland journey from England. After four years with Intrepid, they decided it was time to branch out on their own.

While still in the 'thinking' phase, they attended a 'Starting up in Tourism' short course, where they heard about the mentoring service offered by Business Victoria. They paid the modest fee for four sessions with Judy and immediately knew that they had made the right move.

"After years of working in the field, we had the technical knowledge, but setting up on our own was a whole new thing and a bit daunting", says Mike Howell.

"We initially used Judy to bounce our ideas off and to be a pair of objective eyes. She was then able to help us with all types of issues, from the correct business structure, finance options, branding and even exit strategies.

"For example, she encouraged us to talk to Intrepid about the possibility of working under license to them. They agreed and this has given us instant credibility, very strong branding, access to their client database and exposure through their capital city retail stores that we could only have dreamed about".

David and Mike started the business planning with a draft business plan template, which, over a number of months they "redrafted, redrafted and redrafted" until it clearly reflected their needs, aspirations and a product that they knew was wanted by the market.

"We were lucky that we were working from an established client base and could work-out projections and returns on an existing business model".

They are now taking on extra staff, plan to start a non-charity division of the business and are looking at incorporating a high quality Australian adventure tourism product.

They are still in contact with Judy and now also work with another experienced mentor to devise a marketing and communications plan. They know the value of research, good advice and of networking as well as constantly reviewing their business plan to stay focussed on their original objectives.

Key Lessons

- Solid research, advice and feasibility examinations is usually a pre-requisite to achieving a successful tourism business.
- There are many free or low cost services available to help you start-out on a solid footing.
- Other people's objective eyes can be valuable tools to help you see beyond your own passion to the commercial reality of the proposal.

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