

EARLY ENDEAVOURS

Can pay dividends
later in life

Now that my own children have grown up and are striking out on their own in business, I love receiving questions like this one from Texas.

Q: My twelve-year-old has often tried to launch little businesses, but he becomes frustrated when he fails. He tried making and selling wallets, then selling his artwork. He also set up a lawn-mowing service, but Mom and Dad were his only customers.

I want him to continue to pursue his ideas, but I don't know how to help him succeed. Any suggestions?

– Debbie Mitchell, USA

A: *First of all, your son shouldn't be disheartened – with all his restless activity, he is off to a good start. Indeed, he has achieved the first step, which is just to turn up and try. And he is showing good instincts. One of my golden rules for the Virgin Group is that any business we decide to launch*

should enhance customers' lives. His lawn-mowing service certainly passes the test.

Tell him not to be discouraged. Any good entrepreneur must take risks when starting new ventures, and most enterprises do not work the first time around. Now he needs to take the second step, which is to learn from his mistakes and ensure he doesn't repeat them next time.

My own initial schoolboy attempts at setting up businesses were remarkably similar to your son's. As a teenager I tried my hand at all kinds of ventures, hoping to earn money. Two stand out, but sadly because of the suddenness of their demise.

When I was thirteen years old, I tried to grow Christmas trees in a field near our home in Sussex. I did it with the help of my best friend, Nik Powell, who would later become my business partner. We thought the trees would grow quickly and so be ready for harvest four years later. Over the Easter holidays we dutifully planted four hundred seedlings, then went back to boarding school and waited for our fortune to grow. We had worked out that when the trees grew to six feet tall, we could sell them for £2 each, generating £800 in profit from our initial £5 in seed capital (sorry, I couldn't resist it!). But when we returned home that summer, we found that the local rabbits had feasted on all the saplings and our plans were ruined.

My next venture involved breeding budgerigars, as I knew that they bred quickly; also, unlike the trees, I could sell them year round, rather than just before Christmas.

I calculated how much they would cost to buy, what their food cost and how much I could sell them for, then persuaded my father to build a huge aviary. The birds multiplied rapidly, and soon everyone in the village had at least two.

I returned to school after the summer holidays, leaving my long-suffering parents with the task of tending to my rapidly expanding inventory of birds. One day I received a letter from my mother saying that, tragically, rats had somehow got into the cage and eaten all my birds: I was heartbroken. It was many years later that Mum confessed to having been so fed up with cleaning out the enormous cage that she had deliberately left the door open.

Those stories may be comical now, but, looking back, it's clear I did learn a lot from those experiences. When I started up Student magazine at age fifteen, I was much better versed in which pitfalls to look out for. Neither rats nor rabbits were ever a problem for the magazine!

So it is important that your son keep trying. He is on the right track with the lawn-mowing business. It is a service many people want and should be happy to pay for.

Together, the two of you should take a second look at a few key factors and see if a tweak or two might kick-start Mitchell's Gardening Services:

1. Is the pricing right?

Are you charging too much? What do other kids charge? If you are unsure what to charge, you might try the radical

approach: offer to mow people's lawns for free and tell them that if they are happy with your work, they can pay whatever amount they think is appropriate. You never know – you may end up making more money than you expected.

2. Is the equipment up to date?

Maybe you need to invest in a better lawnmower to help your son woo customers – perhaps people in your neighbourhood want the option of composting the clippings? It is amazing how a loan from one's family will focus an entrepreneur's mind.

3. Do some research to find your most likely customers

If old Mr Smith next door has just hurt his knee he might love to have someone do his mowing. Are there other people nearby who might need extra help, for any reason? A young couple with a new baby, or someone about to go on holiday?

4. Can you broaden the services you offer?

Some people like to mow lawns themselves – could you also offer to weed gardens, clean cars or remove rubbish? If your son demonstrates that he is reliable and works hard, people may sign up for more than one service.

5. Offer to donate some of your proceeds to a local charity

That may help you persuade people to try out your services, since you will also be doing some good for the community.

Finally, don't forget to look for some element of fun to sell your services. Laugh a lot, tell a few jokes and, above all, smile while you work. It is amazing what you can achieve with a little humour.

Maybe a slogan like, 'Mitchell's – Mower Value for Your Money'. Or maybe not!