

# STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Sapp Grows Along With TinderBox

By Matt Ottinger



# INDIANA VISION 2025 DYNAMIC LEADER OF THE YEAR

I sit down with Dustin Sapp at the TinderBox office overlooking Monument Circle in Indianapolis. The morning sun streams into the lobby, illuminating the walls as some of the company's nearly 60 staffers mill about.

Sapp is a busy man. In fact, we rescheduled our initial meeting because the "low-key" day he'd sat aside quickly became less so. This is the reality of a tech CEO.

Donning jeans and sipping a morning coffee, he appears quite comfortable and very at home in his surroundings — at least not overwhelmed by the pressures of being a head honcho. And discussing his career path and his affinity for his family reveals a man who's quite content, yet hungry to keep moving his company forward. The excitement of starting a venture and the dedication to making it thrive are part of his wiring.

"Every minute you spend in this kind of environment matters," Sapp reveals. "The sense of empowerment that comes with that — and the feeling of despair when things aren't going well. It's rare that you can experience all of those emotions (in a professional position)."

## The budding Rose

When the 36-year-old Sapp, a Kentucky native (Louisville area), began considering majors at the esteemed Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, it was an endeavor driven by practicality.

"I had zero intention of being an entrepreneur or working for a tiny company," he recalls. "When I went to college, I came from a home with a single mother — a social worker. I said, 'Computer engineering — I bet they pay more than what my mother makes. I'll do that.'"

However, Sapp soon fell under the tutelage of professor Tom Mason, who took a hands-on approach to teaching entrepreneurship and charged his students with developing and pitching a new technology idea. Sapp and his peers had an idea to make handheld technology useful within the medical device industry to benefit a sales team.

"(Mason) jokingly told us that we had to get our idea funded," Sapp remembers. "We built our plan around mobile technology; the Palm III had just come out — the first color handheld device — and the Palm VII was about to come out, which had wireless capability and blew everyone's mind. We wondered if we could seriously get our idea funded."

Mason connected the team with successful investors Bob Compton and Bill Oesterle, who were willing to hear the group's pitch in an airport conference room. Sapp recalls that meeting as "one of the most nerve-racking and scary things" he'd ever done. To his surprise, the funders agreed to back the operation. While Sapp was joyful, his venture soon required 60 hours of work a week on top of a full course load — not to mention a relationship with his high school sweetheart and future wife (Shelley).

"He was trying to be an entrepreneur and graduate from one of the most demanding programs in the country," Mason recalls. "That was due to his persistence and willingness to get people to work with him. It was also a challenge to go from a student environment to a very real business environment. It's no longer just fun and games — you have people to whom you're responsible."

Sapp, however, weathered the storm and impressed his mentor in the process.

"He was very bright and enthusiastic, but the real quality that made me think he was going to be successful was integrity," Mason imparts. "And I don't just mean being honest and telling the truth. I mean being true to himself and his understanding of what was right for him, and true to his values, including his faith and his family, and true to people he worked with. I believe that allows you to have the persistence to keep working through the years it takes to execute on a good idea."

NoInk Communications, led by Compton as chairman and Mason on the board of directors, became one of the first tenants of Rose-Hulman



Dustin Sapp has recruited top tech talent to TinderBox and is parlaying that collective brainpower into streamlining the proposal process for many clients.



Ventures. It was ultimately sold in 2004 to Everypath, located in Silicon Valley.

Compton would also go on to co-found Vontoo with Sapp in 2005, and is an investor in TinderBox, which Sapp founded with Mike Fitzgerald and Kristian Andersen to streamline the process of managing proposals and contracts. TinderBox now strives to make proposals less time consuming and easier to share and track.

“We saw there was a great deal of investment in marketing technology and automation, and very little in sales tech outside of web-based CRM (customer relationship management)...” Sapp says. “Marketing tech has allowed consumers to educate themselves before engaging a vendor, so companies do not want two-year sales cycles on golf courses. Now, two-thirds to 90% of a buying decision has been made before a prospect reaches out to a vendor. Most of what they need exists on the Internet.”

Sapp and his cohorts decided to ask a simple question about the process: What do we hate?

“We landed at proposals. Traditionally, you have friction between sales and marketing teams when it comes to collaborating together.”

Scott Dorsey, High Alpha managing director and former CEO of ExactTarget, has been friends with Sapp for 15 years and is TinderBox chairman. Sapp greatly values having someone of Dorsey’s caliber there to provide welcomed guidance.

“(Dorsey) understands the problem we’re solving and the market. He’s been invaluable to us,” Sapp asserts. “I just tried to surround myself with people who know what they’re doing and can mentor me. ... He’s one of the few people you’ll ever meet who’s gone from idea to public company to multibillion dollar exit, and remain CEO throughout that entire transition. Most entrepreneur CEOs don’t make it and don’t stay with the business.”

## Ups and downs

Launching a business is far from an easy task, and Sapp believes the glamorization of being your own boss and starting a company is tantamount to having children.

“People talk about the joy of childbirth; they don’t mention waking up in the middle of the night for six months – although it’s all worth it,” articulates Sapp, a proud father of four. “Starting a company is a lot harder than people make it out to be. You go to an event and it’s all about the energy and the excitement, but they don’t talk about the difficulty.”

He admits there’s an isolation in the practice that some may underestimate.

“Especially when you first begin – you’re the boss and the employee and the one making coffee and the custodian and the accountant. It’s often a very lonely job, which is why these



The annual TechPoint Mira Awards highlight Indiana’s top tech companies. TinderBox was honored as Emerging Tech Company of the Year in May 2015 (top photo courtesy of Rob Banayote).

ecosystems are great. You can create a community to help you through the lonely elements.”

It’s that local ecosystem that is improving, according to Sapp, although there is work left to be done.

“Indianapolis has always had the right attitude about the ‘rising tide,’ but now as you list the successes, you have a second level of talent investing back into the ecosystem, starting and joining other companies in earlier stages,” he offers. “We’re seeing a magical moment. Now our biggest gap is in getting a number of \$20-\$30 million companies, not just one or two. We need that middle tier, not just big successes and early stage start-ups.”

Max Yoder, co-founder and CEO of Indianapolis-based training software company Lesson.ly, is grateful for Sapp’s willingness to offer advice and meet with him at least once per month. Sapp “is emblematic of our ecosystem’s approachability, humility and intelligence,” according to Yoder.

“He’s a wealth of knowledge, and has

been through the ropes so many times...”

Yoder adds. “In a start-up, there are endless opportunities for worry. Most of those worries never amount to anything. Dustin helps me focus my attention on the things worth worrying about.”

A focus of the new tech start-ups appears to be a premium on culture – something Sapp admits he undervalued in his previous stops.

“I didn’t appreciate the value that culture could bring in our first two companies, and the type of energy you could drive in the space you work in,” he remarks.

At Vontoo, for instance, he says a tension between board members on the company’s overall mission permeated into its daily workings. While the business was ultimately sold to a company in Ohio and “transitioned well for its employees, customers and some investors,” Sapp bluntly states the company did not maximize its potential.

He was also presented with a lesson on culture in the early days of TinderBox, which



Over time, Sapp has learned the importance of company culture and the value employees place on giving back to the community. Working with Gleaners Food Bank of Indiana and Wheeler Mission Ministries and at a local school are a few examples of TinderBox's outreach.



## CONGRATULATIONS

**Dustin Sapp, Indiana Chamber of Commerce "Dynamic Leader of the Year."**

**Cofounder and CEO of TinderBox  
BS, Computer Engineering, 2001**

Curious, creative, and value-driven, Dustin embodies the entrepreneurial and leadership skills that are hallmarks of a Rose-Hulman education. From his first company created at Rose-Hulman Ventures to TinderBox, he has distinguished himself by developing innovative tech solutions to everyday challenges.

**ROSE-HULMAN**  
INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY





was founded in 2010, when a young staffer asserted the company did not value celebration.

"I thought, 'What do you mean we don't value celebration? We just had our greatest quarter and everybody got bonus checks,' " Sapp recalls. "In my mind, that was a celebration. He would've rather everyone had gone out to dinner together and not get the bonus check. That didn't dawn on me.

"At the time, we had three kids at home, and I thought having everyone share in the (monetary) success would be the best form of celebration. Celebrating in little moments matters more today than it ever has in driving excitement and buy-in at a company. Fifteen years ago, it wasn't normal to be transparent about the way you ran a company. And you didn't invest in space – if everybody had a cube, that was OK."

Investing in the community and collectively giving back through volunteer efforts also enhances buy-in from his staff, Sapp contends.

"They see the better we do as a company, the greater impact we can have on the people around us."

### **Faith and family**

Entrepreneurship and success are important to Sapp – but they are far from his top priorities. He explains to new and potential hires that "this is the hardest job you'll ever have."

"This stage of a company is very difficult," he points out. "You'll either love it or loathe it."

While it may seem counterintuitive, he believes that's why TinderBox cannot be the top priority for his staffers.

"When it comes to burn out, a pattern we see is that it's most often those who are the most career-driven," Sapp reveals. "They pour everything they have into career, and it's all that exists for them. So a requirement that I have for people is that they have something that's more important than this business in their lives. For me, it's straightforward: it's my God and it's my family."

To solidify his point, he references the Holy Bible – more specifically Colossians 3:23, which could be paraphrased as, "Everything you do, work as if you're working for the Lord."

He adds that his dedication to his faith and family also serves as a compass when challenges present themselves.

"If my wife called right now and was having a problem with one of the kids, I'd stop this conversation and go home and deal with that," he relays. "And if you were thinking about signing onboard with a \$1 million contract, I'd do the same thing. I'd have to. But folks typically respect us for that type of attitude – and we work our butts off otherwise."

Having his wife and children in his corner and dedicated to TinderBox's success is important

The Orr Fellowship brings bright minds into the workforce at emerging companies. Sapp, who began his entrepreneurial career in college, spoke with Orr Fellows in 2014 about his experiences.



to Sapp. In fact, he initially gained his son's enthusiasm through a language every growing boy understands – food. His son's affinity for macaroni provided a useful context for a lesson.

"When he was younger, he asked me why I work so hard, so I said, 'Here's the deal: the better job I do, the more macaroni we can buy.' For a 5-year-old, that was like Econ 101.

"Then years later, he was asking me about careers and what it means to grow a business," Sapp regales. "So I explained that the better job I do, the more macaroni (our staff and our customers) can buy. I saw him start to understand that it's not just a job; it's an altruistic opportunity."



## OUR BUSINESS CHECKING ACCOUNTS MEET YOUR SPECIFIC NEEDS.

Running a business is your specialty. Providing you with the perfect business checking account is ours. Get all of the features you would expect plus more with our account options.

**CALL** | 317.558.6299 or 800.382.5414  
**CLICK** | [www.forumcu.com](http://www.forumcu.com)  
**VISIT** | any FORUM branch



 **FORUM**<sup>®</sup>  
CREDIT UNION

Federally insured by  
**NCUA**