

FEATURE STORY



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Doing Her Research, Meeting a Need

By Rebecca Patrick

"If it's something that in every waking free minute you are passionate about, that's a really strong indication that your head is in the right place to move forward. This should be the type of thing you never want to put away. It hits you down in your soul that you have to do this."

That's how Indianapolis native Crystal Grave describes both the motivation needed for a burgeoning entrepreneur and how she felt about her idea that launched the online site that makes party planning a snap; it's called Snapping.

Her vision: to make it easier for consumers or event planners to find all the information and assistance they need in one location.

Light bulb moment to let's go!

Grave, a corporate marketer for more than a decade, was 33 when she got the strong notion she wanted to try running a company. While it had been a bucket list item of hers, it was helping a friend with her wedding preparations that opened her eyes to a missing link in the events marketplace.

"I was trying to arrange site visits so I could take her to a bunch of these places. I just needed a list of the places in Indianapolis that had outdoor space; I wanted to make sure I wasn't forgetting about something. But that list didn't exist," she recalls.

And Grave, unlike many, knew where to look and what search terms to use due to being involved in event planning in her marketing career.

"I didn't want to look at 1,500 properties; I wanted to look at the 52 that have outdoor space. I wondered, 'Why doesn't that exist?'"

Believing she had stumbled on to something, Grave made two key decisions.

One was to be upfront with her employer, law firm Barnes & Thornburg, about her long-term aspirations – and it paid off. "They let me, as I was working there, start working on my start-up at the same time. I worked with them for about two more years as I was doing the R&D phase," Grave shares.

And that research and development period was critical. Grave relied on her market research background for validation and did her homework on starting a business.

The focus group sessions reinforced there was indeed a gap for this type of event information for "reunions, corporate retreats, birthday parties, weddings or kids-related things."

Grave emphasizes, "I wouldn't have done this (start-up) without doing that research phase; you don't want to spend a lot of money and build something no one would use. (You can't) look for the audience later. The audience identification phase needs to be first to make sure you're building the right stuff. What you think is important these 10 other people might not, so it's a really critical stage."

The feedback she received formed the basis for Snapping and identified three key user groups: consumers, event planners and event venues.

Liftoff

In 2011, Snapping launched for the Indianapolis market. Bloomington, Fort Wayne, Lafayette, Cincinnati and Louisville now are also included in the data.

"What I tell consumers is that the site is the one place you can go in town that will give you the most (event) information you can get in over 40 categories. It doesn't care what you're planning, the ZIP code, size or whatever; it spits out what you need," Grave stresses. "Whether you are looking at inside or outside, need (to accommodate) 300 banquet style – you guide the process.

"A lot of people in our industry likened it to a Google for event planning. For the general population, it's an easy way to conceptualize it." The time savings is a big hit with all types of users.

"Young women who have planned their Sweet 16 parties (and) friends tell me that their Grandma just planned their 50th wedding anniversary on it and they're 85. That's a really wide range of people finding it useful and that makes me happy," Grave notes.

The site features advertisers and operates as a freemium model, making the basic usage free but consumers have the option to pay to upgrade for premium options.

"Most people who come through the site plan things once a year and use it for free. Some who use it all the time might choose to upgrade. Depends on the consumer and (if it's someone) trying to grow their business. They then tend to want to upgrade for better exposure, for better leads," Grave explains.

With a paid fee, an individual can save information, upload files and co-plan events with other users at the same time. But the biggest perk, per Grave, is the ability to checkmark all the vendors you want to contact and do so simultaneously.

Since its inception, there has been a steady increase in usage, with traffic generally more than doubling annually. Grave remains the only full-time employee, but "six to 10 people are working on different



Grave says the research phase and communicating with vendors are traditionally the two big time-consuming aspects of planning events. Snapping focuses on helping consumers achieve both much quicker.

projects related to the company.”

On that to-do list includes the next stages for Snapping: moving the site to a more mobile experience and expanding into other Midwestern cities.

“The ultimate goal is to make it accessible across the country. We get traffic from across the country already. From Miami to New York to Los Angeles and Seattle and everywhere in between. But in the near term, (it’s) most reasonable to stay focused on our Midwestern cities to make sure we get it right and then look to expand,” Grave reasons.

Silicon Valley effect

An experience this time last year set things in motion for Grave to start looking ahead.

She was one of only 14 selected – from hundreds of applicants worldwide – to take part in the Women’s Startup Lab in Silicon Valley. This intensive accelerator program lasted nearly four months and yielded several major takeaways for Grave.

“I got a lot of validation from many advisors we had access to there. All the things I had experienced in the Midwest were strong signals that the company should scale across the country fairly easily. It indicated it’s a scalable business,” she offers. “This was from people who certainly had more experience with more companies (than I have).”

Grave also observed the business culture.

“There really is no special magic halo effect of being in Silicon Valley. It’s the same kind of people, ideas and sophistication as in Indiana. The key difference is that in that part of the country, innovation and technology and creating new things from the Internet is far more embraced.

“In Indiana, we’re heavy in manufacturing, agriculture, pharma, medical device development. All those industries are very dominant, and technology is trying hard to emerge as a dominant player. Especially tech where it’s a public-facing product – data warehouse storage, media transfer.”

That’s going to shift over time, she predicts, with “more consumer-facing products, like Angie’s List and things like that.”

Inspirations and motivations

Grave says her business sense and outlook have been shaped by many.

“It’s hard for me to narrow it down to a person or group of people. I’m such a mentor sponge. With every business mentor, advisor or peer that I have, I look for how we help each other learn more.

“I like forming these relationships with people and discovering how we can work together with the greatest benefit possible. I feel like I’m learning from people every day, all day long. Maybe it’s somebody I know or something I’m reading from an article online or on TV. I am trying to take it in all the time.”

More recently, Grave has been inspired by watching other women in technology “work super hard to be successful and work super hard to finally openly admit there is a disparity between men in technology and women in technology.

“Gender discrepancy in technology; it’s something every single person has to be aware of. ... That starts with the funding companies, to look outside their typical 30- to 60-year-old white male demographic when making decisions on start-up financing,” she asserts.

And it trickles down to all facets in technology. “I’ve had people tell me things like, ‘This would be so much easier if you weren’t a woman’, or ‘If I had known you would have been like this, I would have taken this meeting with you sooner.’ It didn’t occur to them that was insulting.”



Grave’s Realities

Embarking on the start-up journey “is one of the most isolating things you can ever do. It makes balance very difficult,” Grave reflects. “You’re the founder; you might not have any peers. You have to go find peers. Always seek them. And it takes a lot of work, especially in the first few years.

“People who have never started a company can’t quite grasp why you’ve chosen to work so hard. There’s a big emotional swirl around what it takes, and it takes someone who has really been through it to empathize with that experience. ... It’s a deep roller coaster ride to go on.”

If a start-up makes it to year three and beyond, “You’ve just beat out 80% of all people who’ve ever done this,” she states. “(And over time), the fabric of your existence changes. You start to be identified with the brand. That becomes the fabric of who you are. Because it’s just how people see you. You and the brand you built become tethered.”

The good news, she continues: “I think all that’s changing for the better.”

Seize the day

Grave strives daily to follow a quote from E.B. White, author of *Charlotte’s Web*: “I get up every morning determined to both change the world and have one hell of a good time. ...”

She expounds, “Every day feels like, alright let’s go do something amazing and just kick it. I don’t get that day back. Better run and get as much out of it as I can.”

As for the future of Snapping, Grave is equally philosophical.

“It will either explode and be great, or it will go away. That’s just the life of start-ups. You always have to be ready and willing to accept the fact that it can happen to you – businesses come and go all the time,” she surmises.

“I work every day to try to make (Snapping) explode and be great. But you can’t predict the future; just try to plan for it. I do as great of a job as I can and hopefully people will buy into that vision.”

RESOURCE: Crystal Grave, Snapping, at www.snapping.com