



Entrepreneurial Bicycle Ride: Seek Balance, Remember Teamwork

By John C. Yates, Special To LTW

Editor's note: John C. Yates Chairs the Technology Group of the law firm Morris, Manning & Martin and a regular contributor to Local Tech Wire.

ATLANTA - I'm writing (or more properly dictating) this column as I ride my Christmas bicycle along the South Carolina coast with a new sense of power. Rather than my slow jog, I'm powering by walkers, joggers and even fast runners. 2004 is ushering in a new athletic era for me -- the year of the bicycle.

This bicycle was a perfect holiday gift. It typifies my outlook on the New Year.

1. Balance vs. Extravagance – It's all about balance – whether riding a bicycle or running a technology business in 2004, balance is a key.

An entrepreneur must balance more issues now than ever before. In the late '90s, balance was abandoned in favor of extravagance. The extravagance came in many shapes and from many players.

- Venture capitalists put far too much money into ill-prepared businesses run by youngsters with delusions of grandeur.
- Many entrepreneurs got the big head and believed that their probability of success rose exponentially by the number of adverbs included in their executive summary.
- Some entrepreneurs hit the jackpot – and the smart ones then began efforts to make their communities a better place to live, work and play (like Charles Brewer, founder and former CEO of Mindspring who now focuses on urban development in Atlanta).
- And lawyers, investment bankers and research analysts feasted on the excesses of what seemed to be unlimited IPOs and mergers and acquisitions.

The excesses of the '90s have been replaced with a new balancing act. Except in rare instances, a venture capitalist requires the entrepreneur to understand the balance between revenue and expenses. Corporate extravagances have been replaced with a new focus on customer references, paying beta clients and cost-cutting measures.

2. A Comfortable Place To Sit - I've learned another lesson on my long bike trip - make sure you have a comfortable bicycle seat.

Now that I'm on mile seven of my ride, let me underscore the importance of a comfortable bike seat.

Similarly, if you're an entrepreneur, you want a comfortable seat for your quarterly Board meetings.

An overheated Boardroom is a terrible place. In the late '90s, the Boardroom featured many unpleasanties:

- Venture capitalists irate over failure to meet sales quotas.
- Finger pointing CEOs blaming the VP of Sales for not understanding how to sell the big deal.
- Development executives complaining of their inability to hire enough programmers or scientists to meet the business plan deadlines.

As the economy melted down, technology companies felt the pressure in the Boardroom.

In the 21st century, there's a new feeling in the Boardroom. Many of the entrepreneurs left standing are experienced veterans. They are more guarded in their optimism. And they are more careful in communicating forecasts – and bad news - to their Board.

In addition, these veteran entrepreneurs are less likely to tolerate unproductive dissension in the Boardroom. Shouting matches (so common in the late '90s) have been replaced by levelheaded discussions of the facts. The CEO is still in the hot seat, but the sparks aren't flying as wildly as in the past.

3. Remember the Wright Brothers – Continuing my bicycle journey, I'm a hundred miles or so south of Kitty Hawk, NC, but am reminded of the Wright Brothers. The brothers were two of the most entrepreneurial cyclists to ever walk the earth. Their zeal for flying is an inspiration to entrepreneurs everywhere.

The Wright brothers also gave new meaning to teamwork. The brothers were inseparable for most of their lives. They were brothers, trusted friends and business partners.

Teamwork of the kind enjoyed by the Wright Brothers is commonplace among successful entrepreneurs. The most talented entrepreneurs are able to develop loyal followers. Their team may include managers who have enjoyed previous success in working together. Often, these loyal disciples will follow their entrepreneurial leader into battle – no matter what the business.

In 2004, begin building your team of followers. This is a great time to search for the "A" players and to upgrade your management ranks. It's also an opportune time to clean house by trimming your "B" and "C" team members and replacing them with new talent.

Teamwork is important. Even more important is finding the right members of your team and taking steps constantly to assess their commitment to your business goals.

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