

40 Under Forty: Tim Dodge, vice president of operations, Clearly Communications



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Some people seem to be destined for entrepreneurship. Tim Dodge, vice president of operations for Clearly Communications, has been through three business startups over the past 16 years.

The road has been rocky at times, but Dodge has no regrets about the path he has chosen.

In 1997 the 20-year-old Dodge dropped out of Montana State University to open Advanced

Computer Media, which provided computer support for businesses and included a retail storefront that sold computer systems. But when national chains like Costco and Staples entered the market, ACM's market dried up almost overnight.

"You could buy things at Costco cheaper than I could get them from my supplier," Dodge said. Dodge and his partners liquidated ACM in 1999 and used the proceeds to start an Internet service provider called MultiBand Communications. Their goal was to be the first provider of high-speed Internet service in Bozeman. They also diversified into wireless Internet service.

The company had several thousand customers in Bozeman and Missoula. But capital was hard to come by in the years after the dot-com bubble burst in 2000.

"We had strong demand, but we were limited in growth because nobody was offering capital at the time," Dodge said.

MultiBand ended up merging with a larger regional company.

"And that's where I learned the difference between mergers and acquisition. One guy is always on top, and it didn't end up working out too well," Dodge said.

But Dodge also met his future business partners, Chris Hunter and Cody Lerum, and learned that they shared his business values. With help from new investors, they formed Clearly, which provides telephone, Internet and wide-area-networking services for small- to medium-sized businesses.

Clearly does business in 43 of the nation's lower 48 states, Dodge said.

What's the toughest challenge that you have faced in your business? When my partners and I were in the initial fundraising stage for Clearly, we were all unemployed and living off savings. We had no customers and no investors were committed to funding the company,

although we were having discussions with some interested parties. An established company found out that we were attempting to start a company that could compete with them and tried to use the legal system to keep us from ever getting started. They tried to block our certification as an eligible telecommunications company by the Montana Public Service Commission and sent each of us a personal 40-page 'cease and desist' letter from a large Denver-based law firm. We didn't have spare funds to fight a legal battle, and we were also greatly concerned that this would scare off the few potential investors we were working with.

What did you learn from that challenge? Adversity usually contains the potential for a greater opportunity. After deciding we would risk everything financially to move forward, things changed in our favor. Instead of causing concern among our potential investors, it may have increased their interest. That an established company would attempt to bully three guys in a home office from competing against them in a capital-intensive industry like telecommunications may have been verification that we had a high likelihood of success. With investor support, the legal issues were quickly resolved since they were mostly a bluff to begin with.

What's the best business advice you have received? Don't worry about the process of fundraising itself, concentrate on the idea and plan you are fundraising for. A great plan always finds money.

Who gave you that advice? Jon Noel.

Here's what I'd like to do to improve my community: I'd love to start the equivalent of TechShop, or even a franchise thereof, in Billings. The idea of having the latest technology in tools and equipment available for anyone to use at low cost really appeals to me. I think anything that supports innovation happening in Montana is a goal worth pursuing.

Aside from profit and loss, how do you measure success in your job? The nature of Clearly's day-to-day business presents plenty of "emergencies." One measure of success is the feedback I receive from customers on how things were handled during their time of need. The second measure would be the constant and never-ending goal of improving the processes used to provide service. Every three months I evaluate the improvements, large or small, that were successful, and then develop a target list of new ideas to implement over the next three months. More often than not, the "little" ideas have the biggest impact.

Which living person do you most admire? Adrian Newey, chief technical officer and aerodynamicist of the Red Bull Racing Formula One team.

What do you consider your greatest achievement? Professionally, it would be assembling the diverse team of individuals needed to create a profitable telecommunications company from an idea and then having the skill and good fortune to make that idea a reality. Without my co-founders, Chris Hunter and Cody Lerum, Clearly would not have become a successful company. The three of us have completely different personalities and skill sets, but as a team I believe we can be successful in any telecommunications marketplace.

I'm happiest when I'm... on a river or lake with a clear blue sky surrounded by friends and family.

Tim Dodge

Age: 36

Family: Married

First paid job: Billings Gazette paper route

What I'm reading: "Endurance: Shackelton's Incredible Voyage" by Alfred Lansing

Liked this movie: "Rush"

My theme song: "Life is Long" by David Byrne

Biggest passion outside of work: Trying something new