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What Works

Eyeing Talent

By Corey Harris

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Eyeing Talent

VisionSpring picks promising social entrepreneurs to restore the eyesight of poor people **BY COREY HARRIS**

EVERY MORNING, SUJATHA leaves her home in the remote southern Indian village of Wadyal to go to work. Unlike other entrepreneurs in her village—mostly fruit and vegetable peddlers—she takes her business to her customers. She grabs a black backpack with everything she needs—including stylish eyeglasses, vision charts, referral forms, and marketing materials—and then seeks out villagers in need of glasses. By the end of the day, she will have earned about \$5, making her one of the highest-earning male or female workers in Wadyal, reports Arunesh Singh, Asian regional director for the social enterprise VisionSpring.

Sujatha did not originally aspire to becoming a businessperson. But when her husband died unexpectedly, she needed to find work that could support her and her 5-year-old son. She also needed flexible hours so that she could still take care of her child.

That's when VisionSpring entered the picture. Originally called the Scojo Foundation, VisionSpring recruits and hires "vision entrepreneurs" in rural villages to sell eyeglasses for nearsightedness, to raise awareness about eye care, and to refer people who need medical attention to partner clinics. Not only do the entrepreneurs earn good wages from a sustainable business, but their customers also benefit from newfound access to eye care. Because many of these customers are tailors, mechanics, artisans, and other workers who rely heavily on their eyes, the vision entrepreneurs' services can mean the difference between making a living and falling further into poverty.

Seven years after its founding, VisionSpring is expanding its reach, both within India and to countries such as Bangladesh, El Salvador, Ghana, Guatemala, and Kenya. The vision entrepreneur program is one channel through which VisionSpring will reach its most isolated, impoverished customers while generating profits and training salespeople on the ground.

BOLD VISION

Jordan Kassalow and Scott Berrie founded the nonprofit Scojo Foundation, as well as the for-profit, high-end reading glass company Scojo Vision, in

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New York City in 2001. (Following the sale of the for-profit business in 2008, Scojo Foundation changed its name to VisionSpring.) Berrie, the "Sco" in Scojo, brought a wealth of international knowledge and business acumen to the partnership. Kassalow, the "jo," brought his experience as an optometrist and public health expert who had spent several years working in the developing world.

Kassalow hatched the idea for the nonprofit during a one-year stint at the Aravind Eye Hospital—itsself a social enterprise that delivers eye care to poor Indians. There he saw that some 40 percent of patients simply needed the kind of nonprescription eyeglasses

Nargis Begum, a vision entrepreneur, fits glasses in a Bangladeshi village. Her business helps neighbors while supporting her family, she says.



people throughout the wealthier world can routinely and cheaply buy in drugstores. People in poorer countries, in contrast, often lose their livelihoods simply because they do not have access to cheap magnifying eyeglasses for nearsightedness.

So Scojo set out to help poor people by supplying them with nonprescription eyeglasses. To realize this vision, Scojo had to overcome two obstacles: cost and distribution.

Reducing costs has proven to be the easier obstacle to tackle, says Kassalow. “We aggressively source from China,” he says. “We’ve done our research and so we know where we can get high-quality glasses at low cost.” He also notes that VisionSpring keeps its prices down by minimizing the cost of shipping and maintaining very little inventory.

DISCOVERING ENTREPRENEURS

Distributing eyeglasses to poor rural people, however, has proven to be more challenging, says Neil Blumenthal, a former director at VisionSpring. “And that is where the model with vision entrepreneurs has been driving our success.”

That success hinges on VisionSpring’s ability to identify entrepreneurs. Unlike many nonprofits in the developing world, which rely heavily on word of mouth to recruit staff, VisionSpring proactively seeks out its vision entrepreneurs. The organization first consults with its network of local nongovernmental organizations and microfinance institutions to locate candidates. Before contacting the candidate directly, VisionSpring interviews the recommending organization to assess the candidate’s employment history and earnings. In the case of Sujatha, for example, the organization learned that she was a recent widow earning low wages, and therefore perhaps in need of the program’s help, says Singh.

VisionSpring then consults with influential officials in the community to gauge the candidate’s reputation, integrity, and work ethic. In Sujatha’s case, VisionSpring met with the village chief, who happened to know her personally. The chief reported that Sujatha was a well-respected matriarch and a hard worker, and so would be a good fit for the job, reports Singh.

Only after passing these two initial screening stages do candidates get to meet with VisionSpring staff members. As part of the interview, the candidate shadows a seasoned vision entrepreneur. In this way, not only does the candidate get a taste of the vision entrepreneur’s life, but VisionSpring also gets to observe how the candidate will perform in the position. Especially important to the organization is how well the candidate interacts with customers, how excited she is about the selling process, and how much initiative she takes in the day’s activities. Sujatha, for instance, was eager to interact with the customers and was extremely concerned about their comfort throughout the screening and sales process, says Singh.

Honing its vision entrepreneur recruitment techniques has been “an iterative process,” says Kassalow, as local partners and field staff have gotten a better handle on what makes entrepreneurs succeed. For example, VisionSpring originally sought out people who were highly motivated to make money. Yet the best vision entre-

SPEC OUT MICROLEADERS

Ask local organizations and officials for references

Allow candidates to shadow current entrepreneurs

Assess commitment to mission

Expect attrition

preneurs were people with lofty aspirations to improve the well-being of their communities. “The work that they do is hard,” he explains. “It takes time to develop. And so they need to feel remunerated by the social aspects of the job while they ramp up their ability to sell.”

As a result, attrition was quite high in the early years of the program, with up to 55 percent of the vision entrepreneurs quitting within the first six months on the job. Kassalow notes, however, that this rate of attrition is comparable to that of other commission-based, non-salaried sales positions. “Attrition at [for-profit] Scojo Vision was also about 50 percent,” he notes.

“You’re not going to get it right all the time—you have to expect a certain amount of churn,” agrees Chuck Slaughter, whose direct sales social enterprise Living Goods has a model similar to that of VisionSpring. (See “Living Goods Calling” in the spring 2008 *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.) “Even if you look at Avon, you have an 80-20 thing going on. Twenty percent [of the salespeople] are producing 80 percent of the profits.”

VisionSpring has improved its recruitment methods, and so its attrition rates have fallen to just over 40 percent within the first six months. “As we get our product mix more aligned with the market, and get even better at choosing entrepreneurs, that rate will continue to fall,” says Kassalow.

NEW SIGHTS

Meanwhile, VisionSpring has developed additional channels through which to meet the demand for magnifying eyeglasses. According to a forthcoming *Archives of Ophthalmology* article, 500 million people worldwide need nonprescription glasses. To meet this need, VisionSpring is partnering with large nongovernmental organizations that already have distribution networks in place. It has also begun to sell eyeglasses wholesale to other retailers that are beginning to penetrate the base of the pyramid.

The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) is one of VisionSpring’s new partners. (See the Case Study on BRAC on page 74 of this issue). One year ago, Kassalow explains, VisionSpring trained about 50 BRAC community health workers to deliver eye care services and products alongside the simple health products (e.g., oral rehydration salts and aspirin) they were already selling. This pilot went well, and so now VisionSpring will train all 69,000 BRAC community health workers to offer basic eye care. The organization also works with Cause for Hope in Nicaragua, Community Enterprise Solutions in Guatemala, and Freedom from Hunger in Ghana, among others.

With this combination of strategies, VisionSpring hopes to sell more than 1 million pairs of glasses per year. “We want to be a high-impact social enterprise,” says Kassalow. He anticipates that within the next five years, earned revenue will fund one-third of the organization’s budget and donations will cover the remaining two-thirds.

During that same time, thousands of would-be entrepreneurs like Sujatha will set their sights on a new path out of poverty. And VisionSpring will be there to show them the way. ■