

## Dot.com 101

George Eichelberger, known to everyone on Earth as Ike, was a consummate academic. He had for a time suffered in the Real World at what used to be known as GTE (“Gee! No. GTE!”), wherein he had been in some vague organizational nexus with Ted, our Director of Marketing. Now he was a systems geek in some second rate state university in the south.

Ted had summoned his ol’ buddy Ike for a brainstorming session. The best brains that we had available were assembled in the Board Room, with the long-deceased founder’s portrait in oil silently watching over us, mutely chairing the group grope. I was the strategic planning guru. It was 1993.

We were assembled for the purpose of “Identifying new revenue opportunities” for our independent telephone company that served an area where there were more cows than people, and proud of it. I had been down this road before, and as Ike and Ted waxed on, my mind wandered back about ten years....

I was the company’s marketing research guy. A regulated monopoly telephone company didn’t really *need* a marketing research guy, but this company had aspirations. We read the trade rags. The phrase “cellular telephony” started showing up a lot. I wrote a White Paper. I twisted arms. I pulled strings. I drew cellular coverage maps on geodetic survey maps with inverted ashtrays. (This was when you could smoke in your office.) We got into the cellular business on a shoestring. Eight years later, we sold it to some company for \$80 million, including the thirty or so people for whom it provided gainful employment. I’m still waiting for my one percent. Sold and sold again, it is now part of Verizon, which used to be Bell Atlantic, which used to be Bell of PA, which used to be AT&T. Some of the folks we hired are still gainfully employed. One of them is Peg, hired as an operations manager soon after we started up. She was a veteran of the early days of car telephones – a time when, if you wanted to make a call from your car, you first had to contact the “mobile operator,” who would then call your party and patch you through when they answered. One night, after leaving work late, Peg called home from her car. She was distracted, thinking about the workday, stopped at a red light in midtown Philadelphia. Then a voice said, “Go ahead, please.” So she did – right through the red light. Peg was a single mom, and Katie was a cute little kid. She’s out of college now

We hired Tia as a marketing manager. Like me, Tia was a child of the sixties. Tia found love with a guy from our ad agency in this backwater region of Northeastern PA and is now a consultant in North Carolina.

Back to 1993. Ike and Ted in a verbal ping-pong game about transaction kiosks and enhanced electronic Yellow Pages and all sorts of wonderful things that hadn’t worked in the Big Cities and certainly wouldn’t work in the boonies. I wasn’t the only person in the room that had been daydreaming.

And then I said, “What about the Internet?”

I think Ike was the only other person in the room that had ever heard the term. This was understandable since, back then, the Internet was still pretty much a college and government thing. But I had read about it in the marketing research trade rags. I explained briefly. “Why aren’t the Bell Companies doing it,” Ted asked? “They can’t,” Ike offered. “1984 Consent Decree. It’s a data service and they can’t offer it.” It hadn’t even shown up in the telephone industry literature, because the big guys were not allowed in the business.

Three weeks later, Ike sent us a business plan. Five years later that business plan was laughable. Who knew? Bill Gates sure didn’t get it back in 1994, nor did Ted Waites at America Online. But a few of us at a 100-year-old little telco in Northeastern Pa went into beg, borrow, lie, cheat and steal mode and turned on the Eastern Pennsylvania Internet eXchange for a receptive public. Yes, I know, you have to spell exchange as “eXchange” to get the nice acronym “EPIX.” Every company, at least every Internet company, needs an acronym, and what the hell kind of an acronym is “EPIE”?

You can’t begin to imagine the man-hours of highly paid brainpower that went into that name. The e-mails were flying and the voice mailboxes were filling up. It was *hard* to name a high-tech company in 1994 – all the good words were taken even back then. I dreamed this one up hurtling north on route 81 returning from a meeting in Harrisburg one night. I called my own voice mail from my ten-year old car phone to leave it as an idea, just in case it stuck. It did.

Almost as much labor went into the logo design and its colors. We settled on option 12 proposed by our ad agency – a sort of globe encircled by a vaguely threatening wraith – all done in various shades of teal. “Teal!” Cripes. I never really liked it, but I grew used to seeing it on business cards, letterheads, denim shirts, golf balls, billboards and even a water tower. The ad agency folks redeemed themselves in my mind for their lack of imagination by embodying our benefits claimed for epix Internet services as, “Well, we’re fast, and really easy to use. And we’re not expensive,” into a billboard that got us some attention, which is what billboards are supposed to do. This one looked like a brick wall with graffiti spray paint – “Fast, Easy, Cheap. For a good time, call 1-800-epixNOW!” I loved it! And we used it, much to the dismay of the Christian Radio station that had signed up early on.

But it wasn’t about logos or cash flow for me. It was about the old man in Forkston who was one of our first customers and e-mailed me with thanks for opening up the world to him; and it was about the priest from North Mountain who commuted to Penn to teach two classes a week and now had a new way to get back and forth. And it was about the fifty or so twenty-something folks we employed that didn’t have to leave Northeastern Pennsylvania to find decent jobs – at least a few of whom married each other.

I don't know, maybe that's why I finally left the corporate world of high-tech telecommunications... All my really good decisions were made for the wrong reasons.