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The Daring Path

I was a hamster on a treadmill. My days during the sophomore year were a never-ending cycle full of school classes and a list of assignments to complete. However, amongst those boring days, there was one meaningful challenge that brought me off the treadmill to take a breath. I have always been fantasized by entrepreneurship; it enables individuals to bring their creative ideas and innovative solutions to life. Participating in KISJ DECA competitions two times during my freshman year made me gain experience in modeling ideas for entrepreneurship. Meanwhile, in the first month of my sophomore year, I stumbled upon the “JA-Samsung Entrepreneurship Playground Festival,” a year-long competition program for learning entrepreneurship and developing a business model. I thought this program would be a good opportunity for me, but I hesitated to apply because of the program’s rigorousness. However, amidst my hesitation, my mom encouraged me, “Jake, think carefully whether this program would be worth the time and effort you would spend throughout the year. If you think it is, then do it!” Based on my mom's advice, I decided to embark on a leap of faith, taking a shot.

As I participated in the program, I first had to understand entrepreneurship. After listening to a few mandatory lectures on the basics of entrepreneurship, the program required me to submit a business model for the first round of the competition. However, this was a challenge since I couldn’t think of a creative business model to submit. I had about a month to come up with an idea, trying several ways to find an appropriate business model. First, I looked up on the

Internet to find out the major social problems our society faces. However, those problems were all nationwide, worldwide problems that I could not fathom solutions to as a mere high-schooler. As a result, I changed my focus to daily inconveniences. Believing in the famous phrase “Invention comes from necessity,” I thought looking for something inconvenient in my life would lead me to come up with a creative item. Nevertheless, I only ended up finding several minor inconveniences. My life was just too comfortable! Moreover, since I wanted to create a unique business model that could catch two birds named ‘creativity’ and ‘meaningfulness’ with one stone, it was very difficult to develop an idea that nails my target.

While pondering about my business model, Netflix's complex algorithm made me stumble upon a documentary titled "Seaspiracy." *Seaspiracy* portrayed the tragic situation of marine life facing extinction due to excessive fishing practices. Amongst the disturbing scenes, what shocked me the most was the sight of sharks being thrown back into the ocean with their fins removed. The fact that tens of millions of sharks die each year for the sake of a luxury Chinese dish called Shark Fin was truly shocking to me as it changed my perspective of the environmental issues affecting marine ecosystems. Since my sophomore year, I gained interest in environmental issues and joined a school co-curricular club that aimed to reduce pollution in the ocean by cleaning up beaches and conducting awareness campaigns regarding plastic trash in oceans. However, *Seaspiracy* depicted that excessive fishing practices were the key driver of damaging the marine ecosystems. As a result, I began to think of ways to reduce these fishing practices.

Therefore, I finally set my objective of creating a vegan food that could replace shark fin. The first thing I did was research about vegan food because I had little knowledge about them. During the research, I realized that my approach was very unique and unconventional. I found

many startups that attempted to replace meat, but there were only a few companies trying to replace seafood. I barely found companies in the United States and Hong Kong that were making seafood alternatives using vegan ingredients. Eventually, I decided to benchmark their practices and developed a detailed business plan based on that. During the development, I had to do a lot of research on the total market value of the shark fin industry in Korea and worldwide to address the seriousness of the issue. Then, I set up my target customer and exemplify a persona that could represent my major consumers. Finally, I documented the effects the business would have on society and the profit model for the business to sustain. With the brand name "Veggie Fin," I submitted my initial business plan for the 1st round of the competition.

The long-awaited outcome left me astounded. Surprisingly, I received the thrilling news of my application being accepted for the first round. The \$700 funding given to successful applicants, a 'seed money' for bringing our proposals to the realm of reality, empowered me to embark on the exciting journey of developing my visionary concept. This generous grant was allocated towards expenses for purchasing ingredients and a captivating package design. Approximately \$400 was spent on purchasing agar, tremella mushrooms, and several types of seaweeds. The rest of the expenses were spent on printing logo stickers and designing and producing the package for the Veggie Fin meal kit. As a result, the funding provided financial aid for me while developing and finalizing my prototype product. In addition to the funding, a dedicated university student mentor was assigned to accompany me on this daring expedition. However, my mentor initially expressed skepticism and doubted the feasibility of my idea. She thought my business model had a very limited target consumer range and was not very innovative. Also, she felt that the environmental problem that the product attempted to resolve was difficult to relate to many people. So, she initially proposed changing the business model.

This was a challenge for me as I had to ponder again whether or not to maintain my business model. If I decided to change it, I would have to change the entire thing and start again from square one, spending much more time than before. However, despite the discouraging feedback from my mentor, I maintained my business model. Although I thoroughly reconsidered the value of my business model by reviewing the profit model, target customer, and the overall motivation of the item, my unwavering belief in the societal impact and creativity of my business model prompted me to stick with the original plan. With a heart full of determination, I decided to take this business model until the very end.

The next step of the competition was to actually create a prototype for the product I previously planned based on my ideas and some background research. To do this, I first had to try out a real shark fin soup. The shark fin itself tasted mild and flavorless. It did not have any taste, but it had a unique gelatinous and chewy texture that added to the taste of the soup. After recognizing the characteristics of shark fins, I purchased various seaweed and mushrooms that could imitate the unique texture of shark fins. However, as someone who initially had little first-hand experience in cooking, only accustomed to my mom's delicacies, I faced a significant challenge in replicating the taste of shark fin using these ingredients. Shark fin does not have a distinctive taste but possesses a distinct texture consistently maintained within the soup. As seaweeds tend to simply dissolve when placed in hot water, I added agar, which has a tendency to clump together. I also added mushrooms with a similar texture to shark fins that are commonly used in soups during my experiments. I repeated these experiments, experiencing failures where the ingredients would either dissolve or clump together as soon as they were added to the soup. Despite repeated failures, I diligently recorded the reasons behind those failures and conducted dozens of experiments to achieve success.

Eventually, I completed making the final recipe. After completion, I asked my grandparents, parents, and even my nieces and nephews for feedback. I prepared both the actual shark fin and Veggie Fin soups for tasting. Most importantly, I received compliments from my grandparents, who had actually tasted shark fin before, and realized that the product successfully achieved the objective of creating an alternative vegan food that could replace shark fin. As this was a major compliment I received after developing the product, I became very excited and confident about my product. Eventually, I submitted the completed report, including the prototype. However, after the submission, I became anxious again since only about 15 teams were selected among 200 for the round. I was concerned that I might fail to pass round 2 and my ideas would not get the opportunity to be presented. However, despite my concerns, my item was eventually selected as one of the finalists, and I obtained the opportunity to present my business model.

Finally, on the day of the presentation, I arrived at the venue with the dried and compressed Veggie Fin packed in its packaging. As expected from its popularity, the presentation venue was grand and imposing, and there was even a beginning speech from a prominent entrepreneur I had seen on TV before. The atmosphere on site was enough to make me feel overwhelmed. Most of the other participants had IT-related items, and especially among the finalists, many were highly skilled high-school students from specialized schools in the digital media field. They had large team sizes, and some even had accompanying teachers. In contrast, the Veggie Fin package I held seemed modest in comparison. I was stuck with stage fright. This was the first time in my life speaking in front of hundreds of people for ten minutes, solely by myself. My prior experiences of in-class presentations were no match to a crowd exceeding a

hundred people. As a result, the pressure that I had to present my product well made me feel anxious at the venue. However, I took deep breaths, trying to calm the butterfly in my heart. I began my presentation calmly, discussing the dire situation faced by billions of marine organisms. The presentation smoothly transitioned into a discussion about sharks, highlighting their crucial role as apex predators in the ecosystem, contrary to the imagery portrayed in movies like Jaws. I mentioned the tragic reality of sharks having their fins brutally removed and being discarded into the sea, just to become mere ingredients for shark fin soup. Then, I introduced my product, Veggie Fin, explaining the excellence of the recipe I had perfected through trial and error, as well as the predictions regarding the market size. While the item originated from its social value, I emphasized the importance of also considering the economic benefits, as it is the essence of a business. After I finished my presentation, the auditorium fell silent, followed by thunderous applause. The judges highly praised my creativity in bringing forth a unique item and my efforts to pursue both social and economic value. I was thrilled by the compliments of the judges as it was evident in their feedback that my item stood out from others, and they recognized the significance of my endeavor.

After what felt like an eternity, the results were announced. Even though I didn't receive the grand prize, I was awarded an encouragement prize. Although I expected more, I felt proud that the value of my unique item was recognized amidst the flood of apps. The experience of the six-month project had a profound impact on me, far beyond the value of a single certificate.

During the process of creating the Veggie Fin, I succeeded in nurturing my dream as an entrepreneur. It started as a simple idea, but bringing the Veggie Fin into reality required numerous trials and errors. I learned that entrepreneurship demands relentless effort, trial and error, and the arduous process of research and development. Moreover, I gained the confidence

to carve my own path instead of following the trends embraced by others. Of course, I do face fears of venturing down a 'daring path' different from others. However, I learned the fact that rewards would naturally follow if I have conviction about the path I choose, along with sufficient effort. Now, I am more than confident in pursuing that daring path and solidifying my own aptitude and vision as an entrepreneur.