

INNOVATE

THE AMISH INNOVATION

Edited by
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How do you behave like an innovator? You've got to have drive, energy and ambition. You have to have a sense of hard work, and own up to responsibilities. You've got to show perseverance. Most importantly you have to look for a need that already exists, and then find a solution to it. And if you're anything like former timber framer, farmer and entrepreneur Elam Beiler, now advisor for Ad-

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vanced Solar Industries, you look at your own needs first and assume that if you're facing a problem, you're not alone.

Beiler wanted to do one thing: test batteries. The Amish man had a diesel air compressor with a small alternator on it that was supposed to keep the batteries charged, and a small DC to AC converter on that battery, capable of converting a small amount of power for his small, side business. Simply put: the alternator wasn't big enough. Like any budding entrepreneur, he was in search of a solution to his problem.

Beiler thought about how he could use available knowledge and resources to solve his dilemma. In the course of it, he stumbled upon an incremental innovation. He realized he needed a tech change.

"I got this idea that solar might be a viable option," said Beiler.

Now it might sound mind blowing for English (non-Amish) businesspeople to think about Amish generating electricity. There's often a misconception that they don't use any. That's untrue.

According to [PA Dutch County](#), Amish may use limited forms of electricity. Most ele-



ments from mainstream society like public power lines, TVs, computers, and modern tractors aren't used because they're too close to the outside world. As a workaround, Amish generate power on site through gas, diesel generators, batteries, wind power, hydraulic and pneumatic power, or solar. As the outside world continues to advance technologically, Amish negotiate through their church to what extent they'll use it.

Back to Beiler's story: as fate would have it, a flyer arrived in his mailbox misdirected from a solar company in California. He signed up for the dealer catalogue in 1994. Beiler bought his first solar panel and used it in his shop.

His neighbors got wind of his idea and started talking. If it worked for Beiler, it could work for them.

"I started ordering solar panels and installing them on a onesie-twosie basis," said Beiler. "That's when I knew that I was on to something."

Word of mouth spread through Beiler's community. They wanted solar; he was the man to do it. Right off the bat the farmer sold 25 panels. Beiler just need to learn how to install them.

The problem was, he didn't have any experience. So he figured he'd just pretend he knew what he was doing until he figured it out.

"I was extremely conscious of this ... I knew I had to present myself in a professional manner," said Beiler. "I didn't have the knowledge or the backing of how to do it but I knew, early on, I was acutely aware that I needed to have professional invoices and do everything I could to present myself in a professional manner."

When he didn't know what he was doing, he'd put the instruction manual in his brief-

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case and carry it with him to the job sites. When the customer would come along Beiler would shove the manual in his briefcase and pretend nothing was wrong. Some might say he hoodwinked his customers; but Beiler doesn't see it that way.

"The client would ask me if I could do it and I'd tell him I could do it no problem. I didn't tell him I had never done it before," said Beiler. "That's one thing I learned early on. I had to be professional even though I wasn't. I didn't want to be hypocritical about it; I just wanted to instill confidence in my customers."

He learned

he'd never get to where he wanted to go unless he stepped outside his comfort zone.

"If you want to experience any growth, you've got to do it," said Beiler.

Sure enough this opportunity started to grow into a viable business. In the meantime he didn't sit around hemming and hawing over the idea of starting a business. He didn't ask himself about the ROI

of his venture because he didn't even know what ROI meant. He wasn't a businessman; he was an opportunist.

"I was completely naive," said



Beiler. "I had no prior knowledge of business; I think that's probably why I didn't even worry about it."

Instead of fretting, he got creative. He started placing print ads in the plain community's paper. The response flooded in, but since he didn't have a phone or a computer, he made all of his calls on the neighbor's phone. As the demand grew, he got voicemail so he could return the calls. More business meant more advanced bookkeeping techniques. So Beiler linked up with business advisors and accountants who taught him to move his idea forward without all of the technological advantages. They taught him to use an old-fashioned ledger system in lieu of QuickBooks.

So it turns out this entrepreneur's product came first and Beiler's business, more or less, developed around it. Everything in Beiler's case arose from necessity, and so he didn't set goals or milestones.

"When a need arises you fill it and you just do what needs to be done," said Beiler.

This idea is the cornerstone of incremental innovations. Just kept adding tiny little improvements and over time those tiny changes morph the entirety of the situation.



When the needs outweighed Beiler's capacity to fill them, he hired someone. And when the workload outgrew their capacity, he brought on another and another. When he had to do payroll, Beiler just fumbled around until he figured it out.

"As the need arose, we dealt with it," said Beiler. "I think it was that way until 2009 when he started restructuring the company. But for years I didn't worry about anything."

He speculates that business consultants and professors would have chastised him and said he was nuts for running his business the way he did, but Beiler's all right with that criticism.

"They're right. I was nuts," said Beiler.

But this nutty idea led to a discovery for a small innovation in a tight, underserved niche market that spread all over Pennsylvania, Maryland and Massachusetts to Amish and English through commercial, residential and agricultural projects.

His idea spread in part because Beiler didn't only limit himself to the plain community and his neighbors. He started doing trade shows, by '97 like the Harrisburg Farm Show and the Harrisburg Builders Show.

"I didn't sell anything at tradeshow for years," said Beiler. "My mission was to help educate the customers. That really paid off for us because once solar went mainstream per se and appearing on TV, and catching people's attention...people at the trade shows would remember us from years ago and were more apt to do business with us. People liked the idea that we weren't a fly-by-night company that was just capitalizing on the new rebates out there."

But Beiler never would have been able to capitalize on the opportunity if he hadn't first looked at his own environment and won-

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dered how he could improve it.

Since then he's found he's able to grow the business by avoiding typical corporate structure. He believes that's toxic to innovation. He doesn't care if someone has a good relationship with bankers or accountants or even if they lack experience. For Beiler it all centers on finding ideas worth pursuing and going after them. He's learned that to get any new idea off the ground it's going to take a lot of hard work and then, once the project moves beyond your ability to do it, just hire the right people and get out of their way.

"I don't believe in micromanaging someone," said Beiler. "I know there are some people who need to be micromanaged because that's the only way they function, but those people don't usually last too long at Advanced Solar Industries."

When you hire the right people—ones who have experience in your field and take responsibility for their actions—Beiler said amazing opportunities occur. You just have to listen to their suggestions, allow them to try their ideas, and they'll blow you away with their efficiencies and improvements.

And that's how innovations keep going:



People look at their immediate environment and find that small tweaks and incremental innovations today have a huge impact on the business in the long run. ●

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