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What's Right with America

Profile on

Mark Wapnick & Bob Alvarado, Co-Founders of CourtCall

With apologies to Plato, who once famously said, “*Necessity is the mother of invention*”; I’d amend his formula slightly to add, “*Necessity, when coupled with frustration, can be the mother of great invention.*” By way of illustration, I present to you the formation of CourtCall.

It was a hot summer afternoon in September of 1995, and Mark Wapnick was extremely frustrated. A Los Angeles business attorney, he was stuck on the Santa Ana Freeway, and as was typically the case, it was, for all intents and purposes, a gridlocked parking lot. His frustration was amplified by the fact that he’d spent the prior five hours of his day travelling to and from a court appearance in Orange County, a relatively routine procedural matter that took all of two minutes of actual time in the courtroom. Worst of all, it was practically impossible to bill his client for his travel time, but if he didn’t, he wouldn’t be compensated for the only commodity he had to sell his clients, his time.

As he sat in his car, pounding his fist on his dashboard in anger, a question that would ultimately lead to a career change crossed his mind: *Why couldn’t courts allow for telephonic appearances by attorneys in these mostly procedural matters?*

It was, as they say, the seminal moment in his professional life, a “tipping point” in his career path, and one that arrived just following his 49th birthday. Unable to come up with a good reason why telephonic appearances couldn’t be made, he decided he might be on to something big.

When he got back to his offices, he shared his idea with his law partner, Bob Alvarado, a man eleven years his junior, and someone in whom he’d placed a lot of trust from the day he’d hired him as a law clerk, when Bob was in his second year of law school. Partners in their law practice by then, both Mark and Bob had Dad’s who ran small “Mom and Pop” shops as they grew up, so the idea of creating a business from scratch was neither intimidating nor foreign to them.

The partners needed a name for their idea, and Bob came up with a great one, calling the fledgling enterprise “*CourtCall*”, a name that accurately and succinctly described what they did. They split the early duties, with Bob working on a business plan, while Mark called on friends and clients to raise money for the venture. They caught an early break when it was discovered that one of Mark’s cousins was the good friend of a California Superior Court judge who also happened to be Chairperson of the Courts’ Technology Committee. She was able to get them a slot on the Committee’s agenda for their next meeting, where they made their first sales pitch.

Following the Committee’s meeting, they were given two courtrooms for a “pilot program”, which started in May 1996. After the successful year long pilot, they were asked to participate in a Request for Proposal (RFP) to expand the service within the system. The only other bidder for the contract was a teleconference company, but unfortunately for the new venture, they were cheaper, and won the bid.

In the meantime, the partners talked their way into a California Judges Association meeting, and managed to sign-up two forward-thinking judges. Understanding that the courts were experiencing budgetary difficulties, they offered a revenue sharing option with the courts that was timely and well received. The firm slowly grew, one courtroom at a time, and in a fairly short time, they had “30 – 40 courtrooms”. But as often happens to start-up enterprises, the company began to run out of money just as things were taking off. The partners were living on their credit cards and before things turned around, they had to lay off all but three of their employees.

Despite their setbacks, they hung in there, raising more capital from friends who believed in the venture, and slowly but surely they turned the corner, building a reputation for dependable and secure transmissions. Lawyers loved the convenience of not having to waste time on freeways, and judges appreciated the respect for procedures and protocol that two lawyers would bring to the service.

The company flourished over the following years, and today, CourtCall employs about 100 employees. They serve approximately 1,500 judges in 36 states across America, and complete 2,200 secure telephonic appearances each business day. In May of this year, they will facilitate their 2 millionth telephonic court appearance. By conservative estimates, those 2 million calls have saved legal customers over \$600 million in lawyers’ fees for time that would otherwise have been wasted in transit.

Today, the partners enjoy the freedoms that accompany success, and the ability to share it with their families. Mark and his wife Rhonda have three sons, Matthew (25), Gregory (22), and Michael (19). Matthew and Gregory, like their father, are graduates of University of Southern California (USC), and Michael is a redshirt freshman catcher on USC’s baseball team. They enjoy time together and in recent years, their beach house on Oxnard’s Mandalay Shores.

Bob, also a graduate of USC, and his wife, Melissa, are parents to two beautiful daughters, Andrea (18), who is starting at USC this fall, and Adrienne (12), and they enjoy travelling, and skiing, especially near their vacation home at Lake Tahoe.

The partners credit their wives' incredible support for their ability to start up something completely different in the midst of successful law careers. Mark credits Bob's exceptional operational abilities, and adds that his smartest move was hiring the firm's CEO (Bob) thirteen years before he needed him. Both claim the two partners have never had an argument. Having worked as their financial advisor for a number of those years, I believe them.

From an idea born of frustration on a California freeway, CourtCall has become a true American success story. It's an example of American entrepreneurship at its best.

Filling a need with exceptional service, CourtCall is another example of what's right about America.

- JRP