

J.B. Lyon, vice president of business services, Staples.com

By Bethany Hall

Though many would call him an entrepreneur, J.B. Lyon, the vice president of business services for Staples.com, says that his job is technically that of an "intrapreneur," presumably because he's building a new division within a well-established company. "Whatever you call it, it is an entrepreneur's dream to be able to pursue your passion with the resources and brand of a large company behind you," he claims. Lyon, who wrote the business plan for Staples.com in 1997, now carries it out by developing and executing services for Staples.com (currently made up of 65 different business services), which includes building out the site's community and original and licensed content.

This is Lyon's first gig in the online industry, and he's enjoying it—even the less glamorous fine-tuning: "It is creative, challenging, make it up as you go, testing, iterating, learning." But how did he get to such an exciting, ideal position?

As a young man, Lyon paid Tufts University for his bachelor's degree in international relations with money earned selling Pac-Man paraphernalia with his dad, who he claims is "a serial entrepreneur." In high school, Lyon wanted to make some spending money, so, he says, "I got together with my Dad, and we brainstormed and realized that no one had put Pac-Man on a T-shirt. A week later, we flew to Chicago and met with the product manager at Bally, the company that sold Pac-Man machines. Shortly after, we had secured the national license for "I Love Pac-Man" as well as other Pac-Man logos. We sold T-shirts, posters and other paraphernalia to stores around the country."

Lyon later boosted his credentials with an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School. But he packed a lot in before his Cambridge, Mass., days, working in the financial advisory services area of Coopers and Lybrand, on script development at the Los Angeles-based television production company New World Entertainment (the makers of "The Wonder Years") and, according to Staples spokeswoman Deborah Hohler, "spearheading the use of satellite technology in the 1988 presidential election." Talk about a renaissance man—this Longmeadow, Mass., native has been involved in finance, media and technology. He also got into the trendy world of all-natural foods, founding Uncle Dave's Kitchen (now online at www.uncledaves.com). Starting out selling all-natural ketchup and pasta sauces door-to-door, Lyon finally took a break and went for his M.B.A. five years later, when the family-owned natural foods business had reached nearly \$2 million in sales.

Staples is naturally a bigger beast than Uncle Dave's—both the stakes and the payoff are higher. In the first year after the launch, during which Lyon headed up the marketing for Staples.com, sales went from \$0 to \$50 million. Now the Web site, which in other businesses is often a poor reflection of the quality of a company, is so good that the company is trying to get that same "online" experience into the offline stores. "In fact," says Lyon, "we recently brought Staples.com into Staples stores via Web kiosks to bring Staples.com's broad product and business services offerings to our retail customers."

Lyon respects the leadership and dynamism of his father, Abraham Lincoln and Nelson Mandela. He also admires the work of David Mamet, a playwright and screenwriter who, "makes great, brutally honest movies and plays...and gets away with it."

It may be a Mamet-like ruthless insistence on quality that has driven Lyon toward his success. This entrepreneur is also, self-admittedly, anal. He insists, "I am neurotic about usability. If your site is not easy to navigate and user-friendly you could be another dotbomb. I spend much of my time ensuring that Staples.com provides a constantly excellent shopping experience, which very much includes being involved in the look, feel and placement of information on the site."

But whatever the task, Lyon is enjoying his work in Internet communication. And what has he learned that he's bringing with him to this challenging position? "Two things: One, that whether you are in a large company or small—every penny counts. And two, that what is measured is managed. There is nothing more important than having accurate reporting for the right metrics by which to run your business and making sure your team has exposure to the numbers they are responsible for hitting."