CHAPTER
1.0

My Dot-Com Life Begins

Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.
CARL JUNG

It didn't start with a dream. It didn't start in a garage.

It didn't even start with an innovative epiphany, which are perhaps entrepreneurs' most overplayed recollections. In technology entrepreneur Jerry Kaplan's excellent memoir *Startup,* he writes that he was overwhelmed by emotion when he discovered his great idea: "This unique emotion—the modern scientific version of religious epiphany—is startling in its raw power and purity. . . . We were momentarily unable to speak. I saw Mitchell's eyes become glazed and teary."

I wish my epiphany were as primal. It wasn't, and most aren't.

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Why do we remember certain moments with perfect vividness, even though they seemed normal at the time? Sometimes it is obvious when a memory will be burned into your mind forever—championship games, weddings, and the like. I still remember what started as a routine day in the year 2000 when my sixth-grade technology teachers Paul Williams and Kirk Lorie wrote on the board our idea for a new website. I was sitting in a chair near the back wall of our computer lab. The idea seemed mildly interesting and I thought it would be a fun project for the semester. On a conscious level I didn't

think twice about this "assignment." But the fact that I remember the moment with such clarity meant something inside of me knew I was about to start on a path that would change my life.

The idea was straightforward: provide a place online where citizens could vent about stuff that's broken in their neighborhood. Streetlights, potholes, tree limbs. As sixth graders, the idea grew from our collective gripes about the dirty seats at the old San Francisco 49ers stadium, Candlestick Park. The class talked about the idea for a few months but got impatient and moved on to other topics. Soon enough the semester ended. There was little material work to show for the class's efforts other than a name for the site—ComplainandResolve.com—and an agreement that talking about ideas is much easier than implementing them. We all went our separate ways after school ended.

Except me. I returned to my school's computer lab a few weeks later to roar on a high-speed internet connection (my family crawled on dial-up). It was June 2000 and dot-com mania gripped the Bay Area. I decided to open some of the Web page files from the technology class. Seeing how easy it was to create Web pages, I started spending the bulk of my days that summer working on ComplainandResolve. First, I fleshed out the idea. Allowing a place for citizens to merely vent is not enough—we would have to *help* citizens get their gripes resolved. If citizens have a complaint and either don't know who to call (and don't want to navigate government bureaucracy) or are not receiving a satisfactory resolution from their local government, they could contact us (ComplainandResolve) and we would come to their rescue. So to be of service, I thought to myself, we would have to compile a comprehensive listing of all California local government agencies. Second, we would have to bring some muscle to the matter—perhaps governments would respond to a consumer advocacy group faster than to a random citizen.

By fall of seventh grade I was readying the website and updating my parents on my activities. I needed to learn everything about operating a website, such as how to code HTML and how to register a domain name. These and other tasks took time—but more importantly—they took money. How would I fund this little activity? I opened up Microsoft Word, selected the "memo" template, and wrote a brief memo to my parents requesting $200 to start this website. More amused than anything, they complied, and I borrowed their credit card.

Brainstorm: Who Knows What Could Happen If You Raise Your Hand?

So much of entrepreneurship is simply showing up and taking small risks.

In my technology class we brainstormed a business idea but there was no follow-through. I went to the computer lab every day over the summer and turned our discussion into something real.

I showed up.

When you show up you risk embarrassment or failure. In the early days of Comcate I took many risks. I outsourced the programming of the prototype (OK decision), offered the product to early clients at a steep discount (good decision), paid an interim CEO to write a business plan (bad decision), committed to a delivery model of hosted software instead of on-site installation (probably good decision), and snuck into a couple nonvendor conferences to pitch prospects (good decision).

Today, I continue to take risks, albeit in a more calculated fashion—consider the potential upside, the potential downside, and the probability of either occurring. On my blog, I reveal personal and professional activities and leave myself open for critique—which comes in bucketloads! I travel internationally where few people speak English. At Comcate board meetings I try to advocate for the unpopular opinion.

Great entrepreneurs show up, take small risks (and sometimes, large risks), raise their hand when they're confused, and try to figure out what's going on and how a situation could be made better.

When you show up and raise your hand, you've already outperformed 90 percent of the crowd.

As my project developed, my emotions were mixed. Visions of money? Of course. Every day I'd read in the paper about the latest paper millionaire. I also liked the possibility of helping people resolve their gripes. More important, though, and I think most entrepreneurs would say this, I wanted to fix something that was broken.

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"You're famous," my Mom whispered in my ear, waking me one morning. The *San Francisco Chronicle,* Northern California's largest newspaper, had run a column in its business section about ComplainandResolve.com. I was stunned. Yes, I had spoken to a reporter about my activities after he caught wind of it via an online message board, but the site hadn't even launched! I was disappointed because people would presumably visit the site and it wasn't ready. But hey, it offered legitimacy. With newfound energy to get the site launched, I finished all the pages and uploaded them to a server. *Voilà!* www.ComplainandResolve.com was born.

I sat back and waited for complaints from unhappy citizens to stream in. And waited. And waited. Didn't anyone have a complaint? I was perplexed. It took me a week to figure out that I couldn't just sit on my ass once the site was up. (My role models at the time were other dot-coms that embraced the "build-it-and-they-will-come" philosophy.) Since the *Chronicle* article seemed nice, I decided to cook up some press releases using templates I found in books at the public library. After running drafts by my Dad, I sent them to a few local TV stations with the headline "Twelve-Year-Old Launches Major Citizen Complaint Dot-Com." Three weeks later, despite my having done nothing but build a website and send out several grand press releases, two teams of cameras followed my every move at school. You gotta do what it takes to attract attention to your company!

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I had never done a TV interview before. The night before these local TV stations joined me in my bedroom for the one-on-one, Dad schlepped out the old video camera and did a practice run. With the camera rolling, he lobbed some questions at me: "Where will ComplainandResolve.com expand to next, after California?" I responded: "Well, that's a good question. We're probably going to head south, along the coast of Latin America, and then work our way inland to countries like Paraguay and Brazil." Once Dad realized I was joking, I started laughing. The real thing actually went pretty well, except when the reporter asked a question about my company's "overhead," a foreign business term. I looked at the pro-

ducer quizzically and we moved on. The camera eye glared menacingly only once. A South Bay news station apparently wanted to explore the story line of an isolated kid chained to his computer. After zooming the lens out my bedroom window to the kids playing in the park across the street and dubbing in sounds of children laughing, the camera came back to me. The question: "Do you feel like you're missing *out* on your childhood?" A little taken aback, I burst out, "But I've read all the Harry Potter books! And look at all those sports trophies I have!"

I would have more serious and higher-stakes media experiences later on, but at the time I knew only one thing: you simply cannot beat free media.

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The local press coverage generated several complaints a day. Citizens from across the state wrote in about local problems. Consulting my four-hundred-page "Book of Authorities," a compilation I created of every phone number of every department of every local government in California, I would phone the appropriate local government unit and be silent on the line while my Dad or Mom did the talking. When you're young it is hard to communicate professionally with adults—let alone government officials—so this was key learning time for me. After the call, I would email the citizen an update.

Eventually I was able to make calls myself to the local governments, a nerve-racking experience to say the least. Relaying the requests of our client wasn't hard on the phone, but the opening and closing of a call was. In particular, how to professionally end a voicemail. I soon memorized a few closings: "I look forward to hearing from you soon. Thanks!" or "Thanks very much, take care," or simply "Thanks!" Sometimes I would blow it, for after leaving my number and expressing an extra special thank you, I'd revert to my scripted ending. So it would come out: "Thank you very much again, Mr. Doe. Thanks!" I have since learned that this awkwardness afflicts adults, too.

Despite mangled voicemail messages, I still established relationships with public works directors who grew accustomed to my contacts. Local papers continued to write articles about my free service. BayArea.com named us "Site of the Week," driving a ton

of traffic and providing me a free T-shirt. The now-defunct *Industry Standard* featured me and Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos for the "quotes of the week." ("America is complaining more than ever, so we feel like it's a prime time to launch.") Seeing titles like "boy wonder" and "whiz kid" surprised me. All I did was build a website.

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To accompany this growth, I had to add a little bit of infrastructure to my fledgling business, if only to stave off embarrassment. Tom Ammiano, a well-known member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, once returned a call from ComplainandResolve.com himself. At that time, the phone number for ComplainandResolve doubled as my family's home phone number. My brother picked up the call and said, "Whoa, who is this? Tom who?" As far as I was concerned, having Tom Ammiano return a call personally was like Bill Gates returning a Microsoft tech support inquiry. It worked out in the end, though you can imagine the conversation (nonviolent, of course) I had with my brother afterward. After that incident I secured a toll-free voicemail number. I could never "answer" a phone call, but I would get messages and then could call them back on my home land line when I was certain my brother wasn't on the phone and my dog wasn't barking in the background.

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Making money didn't cross my mind until I contracted with a pay-per-click ad banner company that ran advertisements on my site. I earned a few cents every time someone clicked on an ad. I needed $20 before the company would cut a check. I had $18 when the ad banner company went out of business. Around that time a reporter for the *Oakland Tribune,* in an interview, asked me how I was making money. I didn't have a good answer, and she laughed in a slightly irritating high-pitched tone that said, "Oh, you *are* a dot-com entrepreneur." I smiled a fake smile back to her. She was right. And I was exhausted.

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I was happy with what I had accomplished but realized the work had become more of a chore than a joy. This is as clear a sign as any to move on. ComplainandResolve.com had established relationships with several dozen local government agencies in Cali-

fornia and helped more than one hundred citizens resolve their issues. By this measure I considered the effort a success, despite making no money.

So that summer after seventh grade I reflected on how I had gotten engrossed in something as exciting and exhausting as my own internet company, even on a small scale. I wasn't the only one reflecting. The 1990s technology bubble had burst and there were quite a few entrepreneurs doing some serious thinking . . . only theirs was disbelief over how they could have blown through $50M in a couple years, whereas mine was whether I wanted to really be someone different or instead spend more time with school friends talking about who were the hottest girls. (If you don't remember sixth-seventh-eighth grades, this is the focus of most boy-to-boy conversations.)

By August I realized I had learned a lot about how government works and how entrepreneurs create companies. Unlike the many Americans who aren't sure how income taxes, property taxes, or traffic fines are spent, I had a growing understanding of our state and local government system. I appreciated the tireless, if sometimes inefficient, work of public servants, especially after a thirty-minute harangue from a traffic engineer who described in bloody detail how he had placed sensors under the road to time the red light exactly . . . all in response to my client's complaint.

On the business side, I learned the difference between a sole proprietorship and a corporation. I learned about client relations and marketing. I learned how to write a business letter and how to make a business phone call. On the technology side, I learned about dealing with offshore contractors. I learned about the wonders of a "flat" information economy, and how even someone as young and inexperienced as I could partake in it.

It all boiled down to one revelation: While I had learned a lot through ComplainandResolve, I was ready to move on. To what, I didn't know, but something big, something world-changing. . . .

Brain Trust: Take Responsibility

By Heidi Roizen

Three weeks into my junior year in college, my boyfriend was killed in a plane crash. It was a horrible tragedy that changed my life . . . for the better.

Certainly not because Jeff was a bad person or deserved to die in any way; in fact, he was terrific. But through his death, a harsh light was cast on my own life, and I didn't like what I saw.

Before Jeff died, I was a happily average student content to follow him after college while he pursued his passion to fly. In an instant, that plan—if you can call it a plan—was gone. I suddenly saw myself as a person who had settled for following someone else's dream, and had somewhere along the way given up my own. I was overwhelmed with not only the loss of Jeff but the loss of my own identity, which had become totally subjugated to his. I made a promise to myself: never again be dependent on another person for providing my life's meaning or direction. I took responsibility for my own life.

It has been almost thirty years since then, and just like you, I have faced many challenges. But for every one of them, I am bolstered by the conviction that I alone need to make my life work—I don't expect anyone else to chart my course, to fix my errors, to solve my problems, to make me happy. This has propelled me through some tough days, and has driven me to achieve some pretty good high points as well. This is not incompatible, by the way, with being married or having kids. I just don't count on them to give me my whole purpose in life.

About a week after Jeff died, I received his last paycheck in the mail—$60, which was twenty-five hours of labor at the time. I remember thinking, if I could only buy him back for that amount of time I would gladly pay a hundredfold more. It was a poignant marker for me of the value of each hour—what it seems worth to you when they stretch seemingly forever before you versus what you'd pay for that hour when they are scarce. Or gone. And this provided me with my second lesson from Jeff's death: part of being responsible for your life is also taking responsibility for your enjoyment of life. If you are not enjoying your life, don't blame it on someone else. Go figure out how to make it more enjoyable under your own power and on your own terms.

My hours are precious to me. I try to have a bit of fun every day—to laugh, to play. And I can speak for Ben and all the successful entrepreneurs I know: you will thrive at work when you're enjoying yourself.

So, take responsibility for each day. Don't outsource your life course. It is core to what you are going to get from and contribute to the world, so make sure you take responsibility for it yourself.

Heidi Roizen is a former entrepreneur and current influential venture capitalist in Silicon Valley. She recently served on the board of the National Venture Capital Association.