



TECH STAR



Kurt Schneider: Bridging Technology and Business

[By Akbar Ali]

As a longtime consumer products industry professional, Kurt Schneider knows two industries very well: business and technology. He recently founded Tech Bridge West, a company set up to facilitate the transitioning of young professionals from technology to business. He hopes that this new venture will not only help technology and business professionals understand each other better but that it will help implement new technologies into the market to provide a platform for success.

Schneider's path into the technology industry began when he attended the University of Minnesota, where he received his bachelor's degree in Chemical Engineering.

"Those four years did more to shape my career than anything else, simply because the chemical engineering curriculum was basically a study in everything you can do with oil. The courses were set up to make us all 3M/Monsanto/Dupont/Dow Chemical ready. I knew after the first course that I didn't want to follow that path, but I was still intrigued by everything one could do with a chemical engineering degree. Food engineering was one aspect we were never really exposed to in college, but I took to it like a fish to water," he recounts.

As an undergrad, he spent a lot of his time playing intramural sports including football, softball, and tennis. The demands of the engineering curriculum afforded him little time for extracurricular activities, though he affirms that, "intramural sports were one of the few ways me and my fellow chemical engineering colleagues could blow off steam and get ready for that next all-nighter."

His first job out of college was with General Mills, where he worked as a product development engineer. How he ended up as a food engineer is a story Schneider likes to tell.

Q. What do you do for fun?

A. I'm a bit of a thrill-seeker. I'm a member of a nation-wide roller coaster enthusiast club and travel around the country sampling the latest scream machines. I also golf (poorly); collect rare cigars, listen to music (more on that below) and am a computer-geek.

Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?

A. I have two: one is *Executive Book Summaries*; the other is *The Best of Black Sabbath — The Dio Years*. I get book summaries CDs, as I do not have the time to read all of the good business-related books out there. My musical tastes go from 80s *Hair Metal* to recent *Thrash Metal*. Yes, I'm a metal-head. It drives my wife nuts, but, like roller-coasters, it is a good way to release all that energy built-up over a long day at work. I go to concerts whenever I can, but try to stay away from the mosh-pit!

Q. What was the last magazine you read?

A. I read three on a regular basis: *Entrepreneur*, *Cigar Aficionado*, and *Metal Edge*

"Towards the middle of our senior year, we were invited to quite a few career fairs and guerilla interviews (lots of recruiters in one big room). Most of the recruiters were in the petroleum and petro-chemical industries, and I was bored to *tears*," he says. "Then I met this short, chubby, almost Santa Claus-like character, Tom Strong, who was interviewing for engineering positions with General Mills. To say I was intrigued would be an understatement. The rest, as they say, is history!"

Most of his time early on at General Mills was spent collaborating with the company's marketing group, which quickly earned him the nickname "Engineer in a Marketer's Body."

"I realized all the way back then that I had a certain gift for speaking technically to marketing professionals so that they could understand it; then I turned it around and worked with technical professionals to help them speak marketing lingo."

Though he enjoyed working in the pilot plant and with formulators, he soon came to realize that marketing was where his real passions were.

"I found myself spending more time strategizing product plans than actually developing them! One particular case was the *Apple Cinnamon Cheerios* product,"



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he says. “A product formulator and I were tasked with coming up with a new product in the *Cheerios* line without cannibalizing the brand. We worked very closely with marketing to ensure we had a unique offering, but I found myself participating in focus groups, product placement trials, and label/artwork design. Needless to say, I needed to speak many different languages back then, and I really took to it.”

After working with General Mills, Schneider was told that he had the makings of a good salesperson, which compelled him to venture into engineering sales with a water treatment chemical company. The experience turned out to be quite different from what he had expected.

“After less than two years at that job, I learned two very valuable lessons about sales: one, I gained a tremendous amount of respect for them and the sacrifices [sales people] make to get and keep business, and two, I *never* wanted to be a salesperson again.”

He decided to return to product/process development, where he spent the next nine years working with multi-level marketing companies. During that time, he helped develop new products and line extensions in food, nutritional foods, and dietary supplements.

His career began to advance as he assumed an increasing number of leadership duties while working with small groups of engineers and later managing entire departments. Soon thereafter, Opportunity came knocking.

“In late 1999, I was approached by a salesperson who remembered working with me at a previous company. He explained a situation where a start-up company that was

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. *Law and Order* (any version), *House*, and football.

Q. Who is your role model?

A. Harvey McKay. He networks like none other, and never forgets a face, even if he hasn’t seen you for years. Nice guy, too!

Q. What was the last magazine you read?

A. *CIO Magazine*

Q. What makes you laugh?

A. *Family Guy*, watching my dogs chase each other wearing a path in the carpet, and going to demolition derby races with all our Deep South friends.

manufacturing ingredients for the nutritional supplement industry was having difficulties getting the process to run efficiently and effectively. He asked if I would be interested coming on board as the manager of the plant to help get it running full-time and producing exceptional product.”

Schneider recognized the company’s potential for growth and, in spite of his initial misgivings, took up the offer.

“Never having had direct exposure to the operations side of a business, I jumped in with both feet. Within 20 months, the company was profitable, and [it] just kept rising after that. There came a time where the business had grown as much as it could, and we were all ready for a change. With a taste for helping small companies and start-ups, and armed with communications skills from years of working with, and leading, cross-functional teams, in 2005, I stepped out and started Tech Bridge West,” he says. “It has been quite a journey, and I’m sure

there are plenty of twists and turns left before it’s all over.”

Having worked in a variety of positions and in as many industries, Schneider has had a large number of professional successes, though he affirms that the most notable experience of his career thus far has also been the most nerve-wracking.

“With the dietary supplement ingredient manufacturing company, we had decided to convert the plant from food-grade to dietary supplement grade,” he says. “The idea was to open up new paths for sales by being the category leader in production quality, efficiency, and cost. In order to get to that level, however, the company undertook a two-year project to revise and rewrite all the internal documentation, overhaul the safety and sanitation programs, and initiate an employee training program. For larger companies, these programs are usually taken for granted. For a small company or a start-up, it can mean the difference between surviving and thriving.”

“After we had prepared the facility as best we could, we had the certification inspector come out to audit our facility to determine if we had passing marks,” he recalls. “The room was quite tense as the auditor began reading her findings. Then she did something that nearly gave me a heart attack (I say *nearly* because I ended up in the hospital that evening). She said that she just couldn’t give us a passing grade! As the entire room deflated, and the people who had put in two years of hard work were trying to figure out why, the auditor raised her head and smiled — she was kidding! After two-plus days of intense auditing, she started laughing and said we had one of the best plants she had ever audited!”

“Did I have a heart-attack? No,” he continues, “but I can tell you there was more



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than one person in that room who felt like strangling the auditor! That was over five years ago. I still maintain a relationship with that auditor, and I think she still feels she owes me for almost killing me at that audit review.”

Among the individuals Schneider recognizes as having played an important part in his success is a career counselor he met after leaving the manufacturing company in 2005. Though their relationship began with Schneider soliciting professional advice, it has become a mutually beneficial relationship which they continue to maintain to this day.

“At first it was purely business — me asking him how I can start this business, tips on obtaining customers, networking, and how to keep customers. Lately, however, the relationship has grown to more of an equal one. In other words, we help each other by listening to each others’ ideas, goals, and dreams. We help each other figure out what

needs to happen today to make those dreams a reality tomorrow,” he observes.

To those just starting out in their careers and looking for advancement, Schneider boils it down to one key concept:

“Network, Network, Network!” Schneider advises. “For a young professional, that word can be the most intimidating one ever. Believe me, I feel your pain. I ran from networking as much as I could, preferring to stay in my pilot plant and develop products — to let the company spokespeople do the talking. Then, one day a very successful business acquaintance gave me the secret to effective networking: *Never* go into a networking opportunity with the expectations of getting something for yourself. *Always* approach networking as a ‘what can I do for you’ exercise.”

“It is so much easier approaching some stranger if you have something they would like, whether it is a contact of your own,

a news story they might not be aware of, or any industry-relevant information,” he says. “I have even approached people on a golf course and started talking about their game. People *love* to talk about themselves. All you have to do is listen, and guess what happens? People start to think you are the best conversationalist they have ever met! The key to all of this is to always think of helping them first in any way you can, and never expect anything in return. You’ll be amazed at how much return you actually get.”

For Schneider, the returns just keep on keep on coming.

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