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INSPIRATION FOR GROWING COMPANIES

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THE NETWORKER

Flight instructor

Christophe Cooper teaches people to fly — and has advice for entrepreneurs looking to lift off

BY STEVEN SCHUSSLER

BIZ BRIEFING

HUMMINGBIRD AVIATION, LLC

Headquarters:

Eden Prairie

Inception:

2002 (started in Faribault)

Leadership:

Christophe Cooper, president

Employees:

10

Revenue:

Not disclosed

Description:

Offers veterans flight training programs (for helicopters and airplanes), FAA testing services, professional maintenance services, plus airplane and helicopter flight training and rental

Christophe Cooper is a serial entrepreneur, pilot, and inventor whose only serious failure has been flunking retirement. After selling a successful business at 51 years old, two short years later, in 2002, he started a new business, Hummingbird Aviation. It's the largest provider of helicopter training in Minnesota, and teaches in adjoining areas as well.

The joy of teaching people to fly — and seeing their success — is the foundation upon which Cooper and his team have built the business. They believe in offering first-class service, too. Hummingbird Aviation recently acquired a \$2 million Eurocopter EC120B, a luxurious new helicopter complete with gold-colored seat belts and accessories. With it, they provide tours around the Twin Cities, including of Lake Minnetonka, city lights, and Christmas lights. Some clients have booked the helicopter to make a grand entrance to and exit from an event.

Cooper has a great sense of humor and jokes, "I'm one flight instructor removed from the Wright Brothers because I learned to fly in cow pastures south of Arlington, Texas, from a 77-year-old flight instructor who was trained by the Wright Brothers."

He began his flight training while in high school. He went to college in Texas to study electrical engineering and landed his first job with Bell Helicopter in Fort Worth, Tex., working in the advanced engineering electronics group. After leaving Bell Helicopter, he enlisted in the Army and served as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam.

Alternative route

But his greatest business successes had nothing to do with flying helicopters. In fact it was while working for Exxon, where he was in charge of the communications network, that he had his biggest ah-ha moment. Cooper conceived of a network approach that provided hyper-fast credit card approvals. With some 7,000 service stations and convenience stores in Exxon's credit card processing empire, Cooper's ideas saved the corporation a lot of money. The technology was instrumental in the success of the new pay-at-the-pump credit card system, which was just being developed at the time.

In 1993, after a successful deployment of the new technology, Cooper left a secure job at Exxon to strike out on his own. With license agreements in hand (for the core technology), he entered the risky world of entrepreneurial ventures at the age of 46. His goal was to make the fast



Christophe Cooper

credit-card-approval process available in retail stores at the Mall of America, which was not in competition with Exxon.

He founded Harmonic Systems, which provided consulting and management services in the fields of computer and software for retail automation, data processing, and network system integration. Cooper brought in three partners and built a company that provided credit card processing for national retail chains. In five years, Harmonic Systems grew to more than 120 employees. "Upon founding the company, our goal was to take it public or sell at the end of five years," Cooper explains. "In five years and 20 days, we sold Harmonic Systems to Alliance Data Systems."

Sudden turn

Soon after selling his business, Cooper was diagnosed with cancer (non-Hodgkin's lymphoma). Through the painful chemo and radiation, Cooper realized he needed something to motivate him. His wife Beverly asked him what he truly wanted to do. "My wife challenged me and asked me,

what would make me want to get up in the morning?"

The answer was clear to Cooper, and he knew that his dream was to pass his knowledge of helicopters and flight training onto others. He started Hummingbird in March 2002. "Fulfilling my dream and living it has saved my life," he says.

Still, Cooper concedes there are many challenges of being an entrepreneur. "Starting a business ties you down, and it requires more time than you think imaginable," he says. "This isn't my first business that I've started from scratch, so I knew what was coming. My biggest sacrifice is that we haven't been able to travel and enjoy things as much as we would like."

In retrospect, Cooper might have done things a little differently. He didn't foresee the downturn in the economy in 2007, which was devastating to the flight training industry and also to fuel prices. "Aviation fuel prices have gone up three-fold from 2005, so it costs us twice as much to run the business."

Fuel prices weren't the only problem. Customers had less discretionary spending. With the bank failures, the government switched the loans for vocational training to colleges and universities, which almost completely stopped loans for vocational training in the aviation industry. The net result was a 60 percent loss of his core business.

"Even during hard economic times, they never gave up," says Bill DeMars, a VP of sales for a medical company, of Cooper and his wife. DeMars took helicopter lessons from Cooper after being laid off during the recession and got a license within four months.

An active member of the FAA Safety Team, Cooper notes that most plane crashes happen because of pilot error. "Decision-making is hard to teach," he says. "We have from time to time invited customers to go somewhere else if they exhibit bad decision-making and lack common sense, [or] take unnecessary risks. It is a lifelong process in flying; you will be learning your entire career as a pilot."

Ask the pilot

Cooper advises entrepreneurs to be cautious about putting too much trust in



"Fulfilling my dream
and living it has saved
my life."

—Christophe Cooper

personal relationships and not enough on getting contracts in place. "I've been burned a few times because I trusted too much, and major companies took advantage of that. Slow down a little ... When the dollars start getting big, you need more help with attorneys and getting solid contracts in place."

He also advises that, as an entrepreneur, you work with good people you know. Get employees who are smart — and listen to them. Have some mentors that have more experience and know the ropes. There are many different facets to the business world, he notes, and you can't go into it thinking you know everything. But then, the great part about being a business owner and a sole proprietor, he adds, is that you can make decisions and change direction quickly.

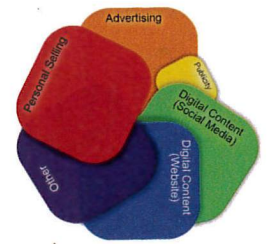
Cooper comes from a family with genes for long life. His grandfather was an innovator and a banker who worked well into his 90s and lived to be 104. His grandmother lived to be 103, and his mother to 90. Family is important to Cooper, and he has quite a legacy, with 13 grand children and three great-grand children.

It's inspiring to spend time with Cooper because he is living his dream, and his passion is evident. In the words of one of his best friends from Alaska, "Chris, you are so lucky. You get to go to the airport every day." And Cooper wholeheartedly agrees with him. ■



STEVEN SCHUSSLER is CEO of Schussler Creative, the founder of the Rainforest Café, and the author of *It's a Jungle in There: Inspiring Lessons, Hard-Won Insights, and Other Acts of Entrepreneurial Daring*.

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