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Young & on Top

Reaching great heights on a fabulous young age

Ben Woldring

Interview with the kid who became millionaire with his bencom.nl

Young Top Models

A peek into the ugly business of beautiful people

Ticket to the Top

And what to do when having that one great idea

The Business X-Factors to Success

13 years old. Listening to music and skateboarding are things the average boy does. Not for e-entrepreneur Ben Woldring. Nonono, this guy was off the usual tracks. He has even met Steve Ballmer and other big shots in the business. Now he's 21, founder and CEO of his own bencom.nl, a website-company worth € 10 million. Yep, this is about how good 'young and on the top' gets. What are the secrets behind his success?



NOT AN ORDINARY KID

He has won the *Business Week European Entrepreneur of the Year Under 5 Award 2006*. Also, he is ambassador for the Beatrix-child clinic (for children with cancer) and he sponsors the local tennis club at Usquert (northern Groningen). And of course, he drives the newest Audi TT when he visits the big clients and government agencies. Only rarely though. Because most of them are willing to travel to the far north of the Netherlands to receive his word and so are we. When we boarded the train at Rotterdam Central, we found ourselves contemplating. How will he be like? Such a young millionaire can't be like one of us? Is he truly an *e-wonder whizzkid* or just a stereotype arrogant nerd who got lucky? But when entering his 'mansion' – an old bank office –, 4 hours later, in the pastoral village of Usquert, we found ourselves – i.e. our prejudice – to be far from right.

A CRUSADE

Father Jan – Ben's coach and PR-manager – gives us a warm welcome and leads the way to Ben's office. There he is. With a big smile and a great deal of enthusiasm Ben welcomes us as we settle down in the comfy chairs. Immediately, he starts telling about the past. "It all started with comparing subscriptions for phones. I was advising my

By *Jorn Sjauw-Koen-Fa & Vera van der Molen*

neighbours and parents of my friends how to call cheaper". When he heard of the medium *the internet*, he decided to go online and with that the ball got rolling.

Still young (13), Ben was soon seen as the personalization of what the wonders of internet and mobile telephoning could mean. National television, the press, photographers, investors and representatives of multinationals went on crusade to the tiny village of Usquert to find out more about him. He met loads of CEOs, government institutions and also some royals like Dutch heir-to-the-throne Prince Willem-Alexander and celebrities like Katja Schuurman and Paul de Leeuw. But the climax had to be when he met Steve Ballmer, the crazy PR-manager from Microsoft, at The Internet Experience-conference in the Netherlands in 2000. Ben's website was one of the first that had transferred to the new OS and for that Ben was invited on stage to have a little chat with Ballmer. The audience in 'de Doelen' (2000 people) was watching Ben's every move and listening to his every word. In the end Ballmer said that in case Ben had any more questions, to just give him a call and he gave him his card. After the show, Ben received phone calls from Microsoft employees asking if it was really Ballmer's card and from the photos in Ben's office we could see that it was indeed the real thing.

ROOM-SWITCHING

"It was however quite strange to tell your mother what to do when you are 13."

Today, Ben has eight websites covering markets from the original telecom sector to a new 'energy' area. He earns money by selling advertising space on his websites. Visitors can find out which (online) company is the cheapest, by just a few clicks. "I know that on my websites there are 2 types of visitors, 'maximisers' and 'satisfiers'. I wanted to go for both so I had to make a website that's accessible and viewable for satisfiers and while keeping option and thru-clicks for the maximisers." On top, he sells his invention *Belwijzer* (calling-guide) to telecom ope-



Ben & Interface

rators and online shops, a piece of software that tells customers which subscription fits them most on the basis of their behaviour. "Simplicity is one of the key elements my websites. To have guts is another." Throughout the years, Ben has promoted from the smallest computer room in the house when he was 13, to the biggest room now – just like switching rooms in a student house. The room once belonged to the manager of the *Mees & Hope* bank. It has a build-in old *Lips* bank safe, a witness of faded (and current) glory. His seven employees work in the 'koetshuis' (carriage house) next to the mansion.

Ben's mom, Jeanet, dropped in and invites us for diner. Until Ben's 18th birthday, she was Bencom's official CEO, signing all the contracts as Ben did not have the legal age. But actually, Ben and not his mother was pulling the ropes. At the diner-table he continues his story. He dropped out of his study *international economics and business* after 2 years, out of aggravation and frustration. For the *Elsevier* Ben said: "In one of the lectures I heard the professor say that the liberalization of the energy-market had failed. I thought what's wrong with this guy? Thousands of people come to my website everyday to transfer to another energy supplier." Now, Ben is studying *art-history*, likewise at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, for relaxation. "They can still teach me about that subject."

SUCCESS-FACTORS

After we finished the pineapple dessert, we went back to the office to find out more about his success as an entrepreneur. What made him

Ben Woldring

- 1985 Born at Groningen, only child
- 1997 Wins a book about internet through youthmag Kijk
- 1998 Persuades his dad to buy a mobile telephone – makes his first website for a school assignment – sends an e-mail to tv-program Kassa – in the broadcast, he tells how people can call cheaper
- 1999 100,000th visitor on bellen.com
- 2000 Jeanet, his mom, is recruited – Steve Ballmer visits him He attains inc., 1,000,000th visitor on his website
- 2003 Wins Entrepreneur-of-the-Year award from Ernst & Young
- 2005 Commences his study art-history - acquires energiewereld.nl
- 2006 Winner European-Entrepreneur-of-the-Year-Under-25 award from Business Week



His Empire

successful? What (personal) features should an entrepreneur possess? His first encounter with KPN was quite memorable to him. "KPN was the most expensive provider of telephone services at that time. With my website I was kicking their shinbones as I made the whole market transparent and people could actually see KPN was costing them too much. It helped when the Rabobank put an advertisement on my site, they were the first but others followed soon." Now, ironically, KPN is advertising on Ben's website. "At the innocent age of 13, I did not hold back in my statements. I just said the things as they were and acted accordingly. That's the advantage of starting young."

You act and you are willing to take more risk. To have the guts to take risks is really important. Otherwise you're no different from the average entrepreneur." Ben finds directing also important "Its essential in order to grow. It was however quite strange to tell your mother what to do when you are 13."

Also, strategic insight and seeing the 'grandes lignes' are important. Involving these factors, to know what your core competences – the motor – of your company are and to know what to outsource and what to keep inside the boat are two issues Ben faced. Although, generally speaking, its a relief to outsource jobs, Bencom has important technical knowledge so he isn't exactly planning to outsource his IT department. "When I realized the concept was worth gold, I wanted to go further,

though I have never written a business plan for it." Ben finds creativity important. "You need to use your image creatively, your product and your commercials. I have entrepreneurial blood. When I was young, I always tried to sell things, like candy and postal envelopes. About the envelopes, these were available for free at the postal office so I had no costs. The commercial spirit was always there." There's hope however, if you don't have the twist. "If you work hard enough, than you'll get there, though it may take years, just like in sports."

"The best time to become entrepreneur is when you're a student."

During Ben's puberty, his parents were of great importance. They protected him against people who thought could make a profit out of Ben like investors and accountants. However, "When I wanted to start Bellen.com my parents tried to hold me back but stubborn as I was I persisted. It was this persistence or drive that kept me going. My parents are now grateful that I did actually." According to Ben it is useful to have a few really good advisors around but you shouldn't discuss your idea with too many people because in the end, nothing will be left of it. "If you believe in it, just go, act, decide. It's my way or the high-way. Although I reflect the developments more than I did when I just got started"

How does Ben deal with setbacks? When he gives presentations to starting entrepreneurs he always conveys his motto: "Every *slagboom* (barrier) on the way eventually becomes a *poolstok* (stick used in a Dutch-Frysian sport to jump over canals) to opportunities. And that's how it is really. Employees make mistakes, I make mistakes, problems with the client, software problems or even when the blue (tax) envelope hits the doormat, of course it is not that good for my mood." Ben has learned not to stand still for too long with setbacks, but to look into the future. "There are 2 ways you can handle setbacks. One is to quit the business and never launching new ideas again. Another is to desire to launch the idea again but then 10 times better."

ENTREPRENEURING IN GENERAL

Why are there relatively more entrepreneurs in the United States than in Europe? Ben thinks its not because of a different entrepreneurial spirit. "If there's one nation that's suited for entrepreneuring, it's the Dutch. But let me ask you one thing. Would you give up your lease-car, your sense of security as employee, and your free time with your wife in the weekend to be an entrepreneur? Many people like job-security

Ben's Six X-Factors

- Guts to take risks and direct the company
- Strategic insight
- Creativity and simplicity
- Persistence, Entrepreneurial spirit or drive to work hard
- Integrity & sticking to your appointments
- Deal accordingly with setbacks



The safe at his office

and simply don't want the administrative and legal hassle and other burdens. I can imagine its pretty tough when you can't pay the mortgage, you have kids and a wife." Therefore, the best time to become entrepreneur is when you're a student: "Because then you're used to living on a cake alone," Ben jokes, "the threshold is lower."

So how to get more entrepreneurs? According to Ben, the government is central to this issue. "Well there's only one left thing to do [for the government] and that's making the financial incentives for a starting entrepreneur larger. Because money just is an important element for people." The government does not encourage an entrepreneurial atmosphere looking at its tax system. "If you express tax in months for an entrepreneur, then you're at work from January to September/October for the Minister of Finance and the rest of the year you really earn. That's not really attractive."

"Every *slagboom* on the way eventually becomes a *poolstok* to opportunities."

FUTURE SOUNDS

According to the expert, a melting pot is what we can expect. Just like the mobile phones with camera, it will all be integrated. "It's not like there is a lot of demand for it, but the companies are able to create this demand, nobody ever wanted a camera and a phone in one device, now no one seems to can live without it. It is just a matter of time as this market and the Internet market is one of the most unpredictable and changeable markets." Especially the Internet is unpredictable, Ben: "it is unclear whether it will be fiberglass or wifi. And the speed of Internet is going to be unbelievably fast, it is all just the beginning."

Its already 8 in the evening as Ben's phone starts ringing. His dad apparently picks up in a different room as moments later he interrupts us

saying he has a manager of a big telecom company on the phone, and that its urgent. Ben agrees with his father that he will call him back, in about an hour.

THERE IS ONLY ONE BEN...

How is Ben able to distinguish himself? What is the difference between bencom.nl and other sites where people can compare tariffs as well? His opinion about it is that he is able to have the newest developments in his engine, it is very indepth. "For example," he says, "the site *vergelijk.nl* has a 1001 products in their engine, but the visitor of the site loses the overview as it is too much, it is too broad. For the same reason, de *Consumentenbond* (consumers union) never succeeded in giving a good comparison to their members."

BEN'S SIX

On our way back home, we thought again about Ben. Already 8 years of experience in business and knowing all ins and outs of entrepreneurship, Ben is a successful entrepreneur who has to be reckoned with in the future: He is an inspiring person who knows what he's talking about. From a personal, student perspective, he even is the sort that you like to go out with and have a chat in a pub. He truly is like one of us. Yet, is entrepreneurship suited for everyone? Is it something that we can learn, study for, copy from others? Is every entrepreneur successful? The truth is probably more likely to be negative than positive. Some people just fit better into a corporate culture, moving up the career ladder, from company to company. Same holds for scientific research. But for those we do choose to go-it-alone, at least have listen to what Ben has to say and keep in mind his Six. Yes, ok we know. He drives an Audi TT already and as regular EUR-students with 10 different jobs and still barely can pay the bills, its hard to imagine success. But someday you can have it too. Media attention, luxuries and the exclusive pleasures of life. So dear students, listen up. Stop messing around. This is your time. Your moment. Your opportunity. Seize it. Start your company today!