

Entrepreneur Profile

ALEX FORD CEO, PRAETORIAN GROUP

What it does: Online media for the public safety sector.

HQ: San Francisco.

2010 projected revenue: \$8 million.

Number of employees: 55.

Year founded: 1999.

Age: 36.

Residence: Russian Hill.

Website: praetoriangroup.com.

Background: Attended Dartmouth.

Worked as a business strategy consultant for two years out of college.



Big picture

How's business: Over the past couple years, our growth rate has been 10 to 25 percent.

Biggest challenge for your business at the moment: Being in the Bay Area and so close to Silicon Valley, we see so many cool, new, leading-edge technologies out there. Our challenge is embracing those but at the same time applying them to our markets which tend to be less technology savvy. How do you stay on the forefront without becoming stale but at the same time not move too far ahead of your audience?

What's going to change at your company in the next year: Mobile - we've

launched a series of iPhone apps. First responders are always on the road and they need a way to stay informed and continue to learn.

Business moves

Reason for starting business: Online technology was starting to revolutionize entire industries. I looked at the public safety space and there was nothing out there for first responders. Police, firefighters and EMS personnel across the country are dealing with similar topics. There was nothing out there to help them connect.

Most difficult part of decision: In 1999, starting a company was the thing to do.

By late 2000 or early 2001 we had been forced to scale down from 40 to four. I needed to decide whether to move forward and, if so, what is the business model?

Biggest misconception about ownership: The length of time it takes to build a stable, functioning, profitable business. Particularly in the Bay Area, you have examples of companies that have a very rapid growth trajectory. But for ninety-nine percent of companies, it's going to take five, 10 years to build.

Biggest business strength: Being around for 11 years, we're now online veterans.

Biggest mistake: With hiring, your gut can be right even if your head says otherwise.

Smartest move (to grow business): Our model is based on giving sponsors access to the market: Panasonic, Motorola, Ford, GM, Chrysler. There are a lot of big businesses that are trying to reach public safety.

Biggest worry: I am a believer that only the paranoid survive. I worry about everything.

What do you wish you had known from Day 1: The level of complexity that building an online community entails.

Work routine

Most challenging task: Being able to step back and look at the bigger picture.

Favorite task: Trying to come up with very elegant and simple solutions for complex issues.

Least favorite task: Dealing with personnel issues.

Biggest frustration: As CEO, your persona and your energy have such an impact on the company that you can't

miss a beat. It creates a lot of pressure.

Source of support in a business crisis: The angel investor (Mike Hering) who brought me out in 1999 from Boston and is now chairman of the company. He has been my mentor for the past 11 years.

Dreams

Key goal yet to achieve: We would like to expand to new verticals and have looked at the medical and military markets.

First move with capital windfall: Investing in online training for first responders.

Five-year plan: Deepen the products we offer within the markets we serve and expand into new verticals.

First choice for new career or venture: Take the knowledge I've developed as an entrepreneur and offer it to others who are starting businesses, including those in underprivileged areas or international.

Personals

Favorite pastimes: Cook, runner, wine aficionado.

Favorite book: Small Giants by Bo Burlingham, about small companies that have taken an alternative path.

Favorite film: "The Shawshank Redemption."

Favorite restaurant: Town Hall.

Favorite destination: Paris.

What's on iPod: Phoenix.

Automobile: Audi S4 convertible.

-- Bridget Riley ■