Teaming: Solidarity as a business model

Teaming is an online platform modeled on solidarity and boosted by celebrities. A case study follows the story of its founder and ambitious expansion plans.

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Teaming is a successful online platform that raises micro-donations for more than 1,500 social causes. Notably, Teaming's business model ensures that all of the money donated goes to the targeted projects; none is kept for the platform itself. Instead, the platform is financed via direct donations, site sponsorships and advertisements.

After launching in Spain and enjoying swift growth in Europe, Latin America and Japan — thanks in part to support from pop star Shakira and former F.C. Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard — Teaming founder Jil Van Eyle wanted to launch in the United States. But the project's institutional partners — namely, Grupo Intercom and the consulting firm Everis — wondered whether global growth was being rushed, with the risk of losing control over costs.

The case study, "Teaming: Uniting many for very little to accomplish a lot," was written by Jaime Lucea, MBA 2012, and **Alberto Ribera**, senior lecturer and academic director of the IESE Coaching Unit. Lucea and Ribera explore how Jil Van Eyle's idea took shape and raise some key questions about the growth and financing of this teamwork-based project.

Learning through adversity

"Failure helps us move forward and shows us who we are and what we really want," warns the subtitle of the autobiography of Teaming's founder, Jil Van Eyle. The book's title, *Como dejé de ser un idiota*, can be translated as "How I stopped being an idiot." Some years earlier, Van Eyle had achieved success in the business world in Amsterdam, yet overconfidence and vanity led him to bankruptcy via a serious legal oversight, he admits.

He then started over in Mallorca, where his first daughter was born with hydrocephalus (water on the brain), a condition that leads to the swelling of the brain. It can cause death, physical and/or mental disabilities.

After overcoming his initial frustration and anger, Van Eyle got moving. The generosity of the people he met through his child's condition led him to found a community-minded project. The initial goal was to raise money for the day care center that looked after his daughter.

He first turned to entrepreneurs and business executives in search of large donations, but got nowhere. So he shifted strategy and tried to raise the same amount through small donations from employees at the same companies.

Strength in numbers

This is how Van Eyle conceived of a system of micro-donations bringing together teams of employees to jointly support an agreed upon cause. He called the system "Teaming."

Van Eyle concedes that the concept of micro-donations was not new, but his way of developing it was:

- Donations were set at just one euro per month per person — no more and no less. This is an amount that is affordable and equal for all donors.
- The money had to reach the targeted recipient in its entirety, without any of it getting lost to intermediaries.
- It would be managed within a company. Each euro donated was deducted from participating employees' paychecks and transferred to an internal account, from which it was sent to the chosen recipient.
- The cause supported would be decided democratically as a group, irrespective of company hierarchy. This would bolster internal communication and unite colleagues around a common cause.

A stroke of luck

Jil Van Eyle conceived of Teaming as an initiative open to outside participation and without intermediaries or a profit motive. In order to spread the word, he created a website, Teaming.info, with the basics on how to set up a team. But the site failed to lure more than a few visits per month and found some people were wary and skeptical of his idea.

Van Eyle's family circumstances led him to move to Barcelona, where he began to work as an aide to fellow Dutchman Frank Rijkaard, who had recently been named coach of F.C. Barcelona. After they got to know each other, Van Eyle told his boss about his project, and Rijkaard offered to lend his name to help.

The media attention drawn first by Rijkaard and later by Shakira in Barcelona proved decisive. The website started to get visits from all over the world and was translated into 12 languages. The number of groups donating quickly climbed from 50 to 400.

Betting on the web

In 2010, enter Antonio González-Barros, founder and president of Grupo Intercom. The company offered Van Eyle the means to develop a virtual online platform to advance the project.

With an online platform, the project could extend its reach: beyond groups of colleagues within companies, new teams could be formed among groups of friends, families, within clubs and other associations to support causes which, in many cases, were small and local in scope.

Through the new platform, they would manage the donations and charge advertisers and companies interested in writing about successful cases or community projects.

In order to ensure that all the donated money reached the intended recipients, they needed a bank that would not charge commissions for transfers. Spain's Banca Cívica first stepped up to provide the online donation system, although since 2012 that support has been provided by Banc Sabadell.

The definitive step

The only thing missing was an investor to back Teaming's expansion. Finding the right alliance was difficult, as companies wanted a return on their investment. In the end, the consulting firm Everis sponsored Teaming Online.

Van Eyle realized that for the initiative to be sustainable it needed some kind of minimal structure, and he agreed to turn it into a non-profit organization. Intercom and Everis invested 600,000 euros in the Teaming Foundation, which was established in 2011.

Everis developed a growth and internationalization plan that called for the launch of the web platform and its expansion until it became the world benchmark for donation-oriented initiatives. One of the planned revenue streams involved turning the foundation itself into a recipient of voluntary contributions.

In January 2012, Intercom, Everis and Banca Cívica launched **www.Teaming.net**. Until then Teaming had raised funds through more than 1,500 groups in Spain, Latin America, Europe and Japan. Six months later Van Eyle traveled to Silicon Valley to explore the possibility of expanding.

Teaming continued to grow, but its expenditures had also shot up, mainly labor costs, and some of the sponsorships that the founder had counted on did not materialize.

Against that backdrop, Antonio González Barros and the partners at Everis started to question whether all this growth was going too fast for its own good. Reviewing how the project had so far being managed and what adjustments made sense for the future offers plenty of fodder for class discussion.

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