

GOOD PILL HUNTING

HOW ONE YOUNG ACTIVIST TURNED HIS IDEALISM INTO A LIFESAVING BUSINESS

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BUSINESS

By Professor Stuart Read and Robert Wiltbank – May 2013

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Bright Simons began his career as an activist at an early age. As a secondary student in Ghana, he organized his friends to protest at a change in the school menu with a mass appeal through a popular radio talk show. Upon graduation, he followed his early success by campaigning to drive political change that would open opportunities for people to migrate freely around the world. But, as glamorous as it sounds to be a card-carrying professional activist, governments proved difficult to influence, progress was slow, and Simons soon became interested in more impact, and maybe even a salary. So, reluctantly, he turned to business.

Phony pharmaceuticals

Unsurprisingly, he began to work on opportunities at the intersection of his home country of Ghana and his interest in creating positive social change. When he came across UN estimates that roughly half of the anti-malarial drugs sold in Africa are counterfeits, Simons decided that fake drugs might be an effort worthy of his attention. Phony anti-malarials generate £270m per year in sales on his continent alone. Simons wanted to create a business to stop sales of fake pills. Worthy indeed – counterfeit drugs are responsible for an estimated 2,000 deaths a day globally and represent a grey industry estimated by Terry Hisey of Deloitte to be worth between £45bn and £125bn a year, touching Europe, America and Japan as it does emerging markets. But how do you set up a business to *stop* people from selling things?

Possible partners

Clearly, the legitimate pharmaceutical companies might be interested in curbing fake drug trade. But their willingness to listen to a retired activist with no technology, no product and no experience in the pharma industry was limited. So Simons started talking with more people. He talked with people in the laser hologram and RFID industries to see whether those technologies would enable him to tag genuine drug packages. He talked with pharmacists to understand the supply chain and the consumer buying patterns. But it was talking on his cellphone that showed him he already had all he needed for a solution right in his handset.

Activist cell

In 2007, Simons set up a company called mPedigree. The idea was based on a simple service. Together with a pharmaceutical manufacturer, he would tag individual boxes of legitimate medications with a ten-digit non-duplicable code, covered by a scratch-off surface used on lottery tickets and prepaid cell cards. The end user could dial a toll-free four-digit SMS number listed on the package, enter the medication code hidden under the scratch-off surface and, within a couple of seconds, receive a validation that the medication was authentic (or not), as well as information about when and where it was manufactured. Furthermore, the manufacturer could trace where and when the medication had been sold, and even the buyer's cell phone number. The system could close the loop on fake drugs and ensure authenticity to large numbers of patients at very low cost, virtually anywhere in the world.

Legendary launch

Simons' first commercial pharmaceutical partner was May & Baker, tagging packages of Easadol, Loxagyl and Artelum and validating them against a database set up in partnership with HP. Today, mPedigree collaborates with virtually all of the cellular service providers operating in Africa. The system has proved so effective that mPedigree has expanded from Ghana into Nigeria and Kenya, and hopes to serve more African countries. Being in the business of stopping business has enabled Simons to hire 12 associates, earned him an Ashoka fellowship and gained him an award from the African Leadership Institute. But, most importantly, it has turned his activist aspirations into impact for real pharmacists, real manufacturers and real patients. Who knows? Might entrepreneurship be the secret weapon of the idealist?

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