

FRIAR TUCK

The project Friar Tuck was first prize winners of the 2000/2001 Startup@Singapore competition.

The Beginning

By the time he graduated, not only did Sevugan Alagappan have a Computer Engineering degree at NUS, he had also successfully found a company with his lecturer Dr Martin Henz.

The two met in 2000 when Alagappan was doing a research project under Dr Henz, a Computer Science lecturer, in his final year. The project enabled both to discover a mutual interest in sports, and this acted as a springboard to other ideas. Their passion for sports led them to discover that organising and scheduling sporting events were fairly complicated, and there were many considerations to take into account.

Realising the potential there, the two, along with third team member Tobias Muller, set about developing software that would make scheduling events easier and with the intention of setting up a company in the future. The software they eventually developed was built with advanced constraint programming, cutting down precious time in scheduling complex events from an hour down to a minute.

Then, by coincidence, the group chanced upon the Start-Up@Singapore competition on the Internet. Alagappan said, "When we first participated, the motive was not to win. It was to learn, to get contacts, to build a network and at the same time to explore the viability [of our business idea]." Calling themselves Friar Tuck (the name was derived from the usage of the Robin algorithm in their software), the group started developing the business plan for the competition.

Limitations

Although technology and research were an integral part of the business plan, Alagappan realised that to have a successful company, one needed business people. Unfortunately, while the team was strong on a technical standpoint, they were severely limited in the business area. One of the biggest difficulties the team found was in writing the financial aspect of the plan. Alagappan said, "Personally, I think all team members have the capabilities to pick up business skills." But he said the team got around that by getting help through the competition and finding sources on their own and doing a lot of reading.

Not only did the team have to grapple with the financial aspects of the plan, they also had their other work to do. Alagappan had to juggle university work and an internship at Arthur Andersen, while Dr Henz had his teaching to think about. Nevertheless, the team met up every other night and wrote the plan in the three allotted months. He said,

“The competition basically disciplined ourselves to write a business plan because before the competition, it was only an idea...so I’m not really

sure we could actually have executed it. Maybe it would have just remained an idea, because at that time I was a student and Martin was a professor, and it's pretty hard to go into the whole thing seriously because we don't have money. So I think the competition was a really good starting point for both of us"

Alaggapan also said the team worked well as each team member brought in some complementary skills. For example, he said he was more of a marketing person and was better at getting customer requirements, while Dr Henz was a good presenter. Any disagreements were worked out by focusing on the positive and reaching mutual compromise. As the months rolled by and the team gained more knowledge in business skills, the plan became more refined, with more attention paid to the commercial aspects of the project and given greater emphasis researching for potential opportunities.

In the end, the team's hard work paid off when they won the competition, with \$40,000 as their prize money. Sevugan said, "I think it's not only the money, but I think it's the recognition and it opens up more offerings... see at least now we can go to VCs and say we've won a business plan competition. At least they'd give us an opportunity."

Friar Tuck today

Since winning the competition, Alaggapan and Dr Henz have set up their company Friar Tuck at the NUS Incubation Centre, and have added another three people to their small office - a developer, finance and business developer and an administrator. Today, Friar Tuck's sports scheduling software is distributed worldwide and has gained some recognition around the sports arena. The two have realised the applications for their software in other areas, and have branched out to education and medicine. Currently, the team is working with the Nanyang Business School at the Nanyang Technological University to develop course time-tabling schedules, and is also assisting the National University Hospital with their nurse rostering. The company's aim is to be the global leader in scheduling complex events.

Even two years after his team's win, Alaggapan remains close to the Startup competition as he now sits on the judging committee for the competition. He explained, "I have a very close relationship with this competition, because I think this is the best way to promote the entrepreneurial spirit in Singapore. At the same time, you get really satisfied by promoting the spirit to other people and other students." He also felt the competition was a good platform to test out ideas and having the best possible people to judge that idea at zero cost.

Useful Tips

Alaggapan has the following advice for future participants:

1. **Be realistic.** Don't aim for something that is not plausible because you will have to back it up with facts.
2. Come up with a **prototype** or concept, rather than just an idea or plan. The plan alone may not be sufficient to convince the judges.
3. **Listen** - an important thing for an entrepreneur.
4. **Attend** all events organised by the competition, e.g. talks, boot camp etc.