

Starting a Business in a Restricted Access Nation

Preparation and observation are lessons learned from the practical experience of tentmakers reaching unreached peoples. Here are a set of practical guidelines to help you establishing the necessary freedom to accomplish the mission task by means of tentmaking to the unreached.

by Patrick Lai

If God called me to a people and told me I had three years to reach them, I'd give two years to preparing and one year to doing ministry with the people." Those are the words Leroy Eims of the Navigators once told me. Many tentmakers come overseas with an Indiana Jones mentality, "They make it up as they go." There is too much at stake spiritually, financially and in terms of security to make too many mistakes in the beginning. Understanding that "though a man plans his way, it is the Lord who directs his steps," we need to carefully prepare ourselves for the job and ministry the Father has called us to do.

For starters, reaching Muslims requires a long-term commitment. Working for a multi-national corporation or a school is tentative. Most contracts are for two years. Managing time is a constant struggle for tentmakers. Keeping the team in a given city with proper visas is another challenge. How can a team of tentmakers, seeking to plant a church among an unreached people, maintain a long-term residence in a Restricted Access Nation (RAN)? One solution is to start your own business. Establishing your own business enables you to control the amount of time needed to be with friends and neighbors..

A Real Life Story

Jim* (a businessman), Jack (an English teacher), and Joe (an electrical engineer), who, from the beginning, were considered model tentmakers. They each had a clear calling to reach the same Muslim people group. They each had Master's degrees in their areas of expertise. Each had some cross-cultural ministry and/or formal biblical training. Jim, Jack and Joe decided to work together as a team. They called themselves the XYZ team. As a team they joined Frontiers, a mission that works exclusively among Muslims. Frontiers, they realized, would provide the encouragement, guidance and accountability they would need overseas. Their churches were behind them, sending them out, while promising to pray for them, emotionally support them, and gave them a large financial gift toward their air tickets and moving expenses.

Feeling adequately equipped for every good work, they applied for jobs with national firms in the country to which they were called. Soon they each had a job and moved their families into the country. Jim and Joe had one-year contracts and Jack a three-month quarterly contract which was renewable. Despite their good start and preparation, within weeks problems began to arise. Joe's engineering firm decided his skills were needed in

another city, so he was transferred 900km away. Jack found his teaching schedule to be unbearable. He was teaching 32 hours a week (not counting preparation time) and he was forbidden to discuss religious issues with any of his students inside or outside the classroom. Jim's business associates were all foreigners. On the average he spent 20 minutes a week at the office in discussions with members of the targeted people group. After two years in the country, about all they could say for themselves is that they had survived living in the country for two years. Each of them had two to eight good local friends, but in the two years there, the XYZ team had shared the "Good News" only twice. They lived the life on their jobs, but it did not seem to make any difference. The XYZ team came back to their home country and their churches, discouraged but not defeated.

Realizing their goal of evangelizing and planting a church among the Muslims had not been fulfilled, Jim, Jack and Joe wondered: Is there a better way? In evaluating their situation they realized they had two major problems, time and money.

Since they worked for someone else, they had little control over their time. Their jobs also limited their associations with others.

Yet they had to have a job to feed their families and obtain a legal resident visa. The XYZ team discussed their experiences and struggles with their churches and friends at home. From the lessons learned they decided it would be best to start their own business. This would enable them to work for themselves, giving them control of their time.

The churches would help support them so as to reduce the actual number of hours they would need to work. For nearly two years the XYZ team prepared and planned their business. Jim and Joe organized, registered, wrote up a business plan and raised funding for their business. Jack returned to school to receive a more pertinent degree. They also raised monthly financial support to meet their basic needs. Their church support enabled them to have more flexibility and keep control of their time. It also allowed them to limit the number of hours they would have to be in the office, creating more time to socialize with Muslims. Operating their own business allowed them to stay near one another and minister together. They met at the office almost daily for prayer and encouragement, without raising any suspicion. Eight years after beginning their business, the XYZ team has won and gathered about a dozen Muslim believers, and their business is currently expanding to open a second outlet.

Proverbs 18:15 teaches us "An intelligent man is always open to new ideas, in fact he looks for them" (Living Bible). Jesus said to "look on the world." Looking involves seeing. It involves searching for new ideas. To "see" something we must be where it is. The XYZ team had been in the country for one year. They had seen the needs, they knew the opportunities. They had a clear idea of what type of business would succeed. Expe-

rience has shown us we need to go to countries and "see," not just go for a prayer walk, or do a work project. We need to "see" and observe. Clearly it is the Lord who empowers our successes, yet there are some practical guidelines we should "look into" before setting up our own business overseas.

Study the People

We first need to "see" the people. Every country, every people group, every language has its distinctives. Take time to study the people and learn these distinctives. Learn their interests and needs.

People are material beings. Jesus says, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9 NIV).

What do people want? Peoples, countries, and societies usually fall into one of four basic categories. All societies want basic needs (food, water, shelter, and peace), jobs, education and leisure. Once a country has their basic needs met, the people want jobs. Once they have simple or semi-skilled jobs, they want more advanced education to get better jobs. And once they have good jobs they want leisure to spend their money on.

Undeveloped countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Cambodia, want their basic needs met. Getting training in health services, water projects, and the building of homes will grant you entry into these countries.

Indonesia, Vietnam and Algeria are under developed countries. They need jobs for their people. Small manufacturing companies, and service related businesses, like taxis, hair stylists, bakeries, restaurants, or other

simple retail stores will create the needed jobs.

Developing countries like China, Malaysia and Morocco need education. Setting up English, computer and business schools will endear you to these governments and give you excellent opportunities to meet people while you work. Saudi Arabia, Oman and Singapore, are developed countries which want leisure activities. Operating tours, clubs or hotels, up scale restaurants, or providing consulting services which reduce their work loads are good entry strategies for these places.

Initially people followed Jesus for His provision of food and His signs. The people were primarily in the pursuit of self gratification and happiness. Jesus fed the hungry. He healed the sick. Through these "attractions" people came to understand who He was. Is it more spiritual to meet those needs only and not other needs of men? There are many ways we may attract people's attention. "Look" for the needs of the people and then determine before the Lord how you can uniquely meet them.

Study the Culture and its Trends

We need to study current trends to "see" how the people and their culture are moving. How does the culture work? What motivates the people to work? Does religion have a high profile? Asking and answering these questions and others will help in developing both your business and ministry strategy. Though it is good for your business to supply an income for you or the team, this is not essential. All businesses must make a profit to stay afloat. However, if you have an additional income from churches at home you need only to ensure your business is profitable enough to cover your fixed costs and

national workers salaries.

The business you start should fulfill a need or want of the government. What does the government want? Usually the answer may be found in the daily paper. "Look" for articles declaring where the government is going, what projects they are undertaking and what type of job skills it will take to get there. Study the paper, learn their needs.

Build a business which meets a need or creates an attraction within your target people group. Such a business will ensure your longevity in the country. Businesses which put you face to face with the target people in natural settings are best. Yet, if this does not appear feasible due to government or personal limitations, it's okay. In nine years of living in a Muslim country only twice have I actually done business with a Muslim. I build friendships and create witnessing opportunities through social contacts with neighbors and people I meet in clubs, gyms, community centres, at community events, and coffee shops. However, it is essential that your business provides a viable long-term entry strategy.

Plan ahead. Think through where your target country and people are today so as to know where it will be going tomorrow. Don't prepare yourself for jobs the government currently needs, but for jobs they are going to need three to five years from now. Why? The training needed to qualify plus the application process to set up a business is often two to three years, sometimes longer. Unless you already have the needed skills and/or degrees needed to set up a business or school, by the time you are ready your opportunity may be gone. As the Americans

say, "the early bird catches the worm." One friend entered China in 1985, just as China was opening. More by accident than design he found a job teaching English when English teaching was hardly known in China.

Yet, 10 years later he is still working there. Others coming in nowadays need higher degrees to get in. But as he was there first, he has become known. He has become a friend of the

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university. As a result he has been able to stay and has seen many come to know the Lord. People coming in later—after a need is well established—will need higher and higher degrees and greater experience to be accepted.

Most countries pattern themselves after other countries. Learn as to what other countries the people or leaders compare themselves. This will help to anticipate what the needs of a country are. Watch and "see" the trends of countries world-wide. Poorer, less-developed countries look to similar, yet more advanced countries as a model. These countries learn from the more developed nations, from their example and struggles, both good and bad. India, with its huge population problems and diverse cultures, often compares itself to China. Singapore is small yet

has four main cultures and languages. Singapore tends to emulate Switzerland which is also small and has three diverse languages and cultures. Some North African countries pattern themselves after France. If you know the economy, education, transportation industry of your target country, and who they are patterning themselves after, you may easily determine where the country is headed and what type of businesses they will need five years from now. If

you can, try and visit one or two countries which have recently (within the last decade) come through the stage that your target country is now passing through. Learn the needs of this country in all areas; educationally, mechanically, socially, materially, as well as spiritually. Look for business or education ideas which you may be able to reproduce into a business and visa.

We know how to tell the signs of the weather, so in the same way we should learn to accurately forecast both economic, educational, spiritual, and other needs of the country and people you are targeting. Talk to the people who are there. If there is a minority Christian population, do not rely on the Christians alone for your information. Christians often want to please you so they tell you what you want to hear. They want you to come to their country. So get input from both the non-Christian and Christian leaders. Non-Christians will see you as a competitor.

Often they will point out the reasons why you should not come. I find this more helpful, for if I can overcome the problems, I can surely begin a business. Where they disagree, I tend to trust the advice of the non-Christians over that of the believers.

The Educational System

Based upon where the country is in the world, be it under developed, developing or developed, what are their educational needs? English, computer, and business skills are a few of the types of schools we can start to serve the people. Even as the missionaries of the 1800s used elementary and high schools to influence people for Jesus, we too may use speciality schools to bless and influence the people. Such schools are welcome in most developing countries. Schools create contacts with a large number of people. In many Muslim and Asian countries the position of a teacher is an exalted position.

If you do not have the degrees necessary to teach or to accomplish what is needed, be committed to getting such qualifications. Be well prepared. Again, do not get degrees for today. Rather look ahead.

Resources of the Land

Many tentmakers are like the laborer who went out to the field to work. In setting up shop he decides to sell imported corn because corn is easy to import from his home country. But nothing sells.

Only when the tentmaker looks around does he/she learn no one is buying because the shop is in the middle of a rice field! There is food in abundance and the people would prefer rice to corn. Based upon the raw materials available in the country, we need to study what can be exported to other countries?

What locally-made products can we export to other countries? Are there useful items in your target country which you have never seen in the USA or Europe? Why? Send a few samples to friends in your home country. Ask them if they like it and if they do, how much would they pay for

it? If they would pay a price more than what you can buy and ship it for, you could have yourself a business. Vice versa, what products in your home country are needed or would be beneficial in your target country? Find out why they aren't presently being sold there? Have a few shipped to your country and try selling them in a friendly market or to friends. Again if the price people are willing to pay is more than your costs, you could have yourself an import/export business.

Based upon the location of the country, climate and geography, you could determine factors which would be beneficial for you to begin a business. "Look" at the water, soil and temperature. Everyone needs water. Can you dig wells, or create irrigation systems, or develop other systems for obtaining water? Is the temperature and soil suitable for farming a crop which is presently not available in this land?

After World War II, one missionary serving in Japan was unwelcome when he visited villages in north central Honshu. Nonetheless he became concerned about the plight of the farmers in his area. Their economic situation was steadily declining. However, he "saw" the Japanese people loved strawberries and paid well for them. While on furlough he visited a strawberry growing area in his home state. He learned the soil and climate in his state were similar to that of the village in Honshu. When he returned to Japan he took several strawberry plants with him and numerous seeds. Today that village is known as the strawberry capital of Honshu. Obviously the farmers have been doing quite well. The missionary in turn became accepted and people listened to his message. He went on to plant one church there. The key in the midst of all these things is to be will-

ing to experiment. The capital investment of trial and error is quite small.

Your efforts should result in an idea that will bring access to the country, blessing to the people, and generate profits which are multipliable.

Develop a Uniqueness about Yourself

Governments will not hire individuals who might take a national's job. Countries will not provide visas for projects or businesses which clearly do not benefit their people. Thus you need to have an angle or an idea that makes it necessary for you alone to do the job. You have to tell the government what they want to hear in the way they want to hear it.

In one country a co-worker's visa application was rejected even though his business had been approved. When he asked the government official, "Why is my application rejected?" The official replied, as most officials do, "I cannot tell you." But after some prompting, the official did say, "If I were you I'd check the national library for ideas." He did. There he found a book published by the government on how to set up a business and apply for a visa. It listed answers to all of the questions that were on his visa application papers! Though his answers were similar to theirs, he decided to rewrite his application using their exact terminology. He copied straight out of their book! Soon after refiling his application he was granted a two year visa. Now everyone going to that country uses that book to fill out their application forms and everyone has been approved the first time! Wording is important.

These are some of the unique aspects about yourself or your application that governments are usually interested in. Use these ideas to give

yourself an edge as you prepare.

1) Time table—How long will it take you to set-up as well as hire/train a local person to take your place. Of course when the time period is up, you may need to stay longer to hire and train more people.

2) New marketing promotion—We alone understand the method which will succeed in selling the product. We need to do it ourselves.

3) Specialization—Create your job to require specialized training or technology. We need someone who has specific qualifications (like the ones you happen to already have).

4) Cultural advantage—My racial background, or national background is desired by our head office. As our headquarters is in Germany (or whatever nationality you are), we want a German to oversee our operations here and communicate with the home office.

5) Language advantage—We need someone who can operate in these languages (of course they are the languages you speak).

Be Professional

You cannot claim to be a businessman and then live among the poor. You cannot claim to be a regional director and then never leave the country. Here are some basic pointers to be aware of when beginning a business:

1) Get a lawyer to process your application papers. The lawyer does not have to be a Christian. One co-worker hired a well-known Christian lawyer who was locked into doing things one way. Because she was successful in getting Christian service organizations into the country, this tentmaker was encouraged to use her as well. After three rejections by the

government, he tried another lawyer, a non-Christian.

Soon afterwards he was granted a visa. It may cost US \$1,000, but a lawyer will introduce you to the right people and pave the way for the approval of your application papers.

2) Get a local address. Almost every city has business centres where you may rent a furnished room, have available a secretary, a fax, copy machine, etc. Business centres have

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respected addresses. You may work out of your home and use the business centre for your address and faxes. Be sure it is legal to work out of your house. Otherwise, rent a small, inexpensive room for an office. You do not need to invest in a "power" office. One friend did this and went bankrupt after four years.

I worked out of my home for 10 years and did fine. Recent growth has now allowed us to rent an office. Basically you need a street address and a business centre will provide this. Usually a P.O. Box will not be acceptable. As your business grows you may move into a more up-scale facility, but do not waste capital on an office. It is standard business procedure to have meetings in hotels or other nice restaurants. Three or four times a month I spend US\$50 on lunch with a client, which is a lot cheaper than renting an office.

3) Get a phone, a fax and an E-

mail address. These are essential. Teletypes are used only in India and even there are becoming outdated. For your initial set-up, an address with a phone, fax and E-mail should suffice.

4) Type up stationery and business cards. The business cards should have your name, title, company's name and, of course, your address, telephone, fax, and E-mail numbers. It is good to use English on one side and the national language on

the other side. Stationery with a local address is an important need, too. Recently the visa application of one of our co-worker's was rejected. We learned it was because the stationery did not have a local office address on it. Within two days we found a local business centre, rented a mail box and, using the local address, resubmitted our papers with the exact same wording. The visa

was granted the very next week.

5) Buy a sharp business suit. "Power suits" are a part of doing business overseas. When you meet with government officials you must look like a true business person. You must definitely dress better than they do. Dress for success. If you look like you have money, they will think you do.

Governments and businesses wish to deal with individuals who are successful. In some Southeast and Central Asian countries western suits are not appropriate "See" what wealthy businessmen wear and dress as they do. First impressions are important.

6) Print or have available some sharp (well done two or three color brochures or pamphlets of your product and/or your qualifications. These brochures should picture the product and clearly sell the product or service to a customer.

To scout out the land initially, go as a student. Most countries welcome

foreign students so use the opportunity to study the language and the land. If there is no school available take several short-term trips. One is not enough to get a balanced picture. Do your homework first and then establish your entry strategy. Yes, there are financial and other risks. Yet these are risks we can and must make if all nations are to hear the Good News. May all hear it soon!

Patrick Lai has a B.A. in Business Marketing and an MDiv in Missions. He and his family have been living overseas for 15 years. During this time the Lord has enabled them and their disciples to plant 5 churches in Asia, two are among a Muslim unreached people group. Patrick has also started 6 businesses of various types, some to provide jobs for believers and some to facilitate visas and ministry for expatriate tentmakers.

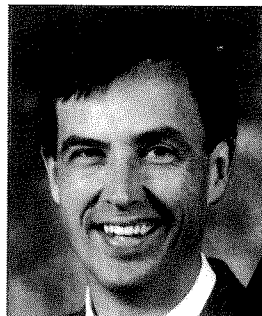
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most rural and urban regions of the world on an on-going basis. These can provide the full range blessings from economic and mercy ministries to salvation and fellowship in Christ.

Please pray for networks and effective caring groups to be established in order to create and multiply thousands of practical modular businesses for strategic outreach especially among the unreached peoples of the world.

David Hagen is trained in Chemistry, Physics and Mechanical Engineering. He reviews and creates technologies particularly to process local resources in efficient and renewable energy systems. He grew up in India and is dedicated to applying technologies to create and multiply modular business for developing countries. Contact c/o Tentmaking International Exchange.

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Since 1988, Doug Lucas has led Team Expansion, a cooperation of church planting missionaries based in the Midwestern

USA. His interest in tentmaking comes through Team Expansion's involvement in nations that are off-limits to traditional missionaries. Doug's degrees and grad studies are from Kentucky Christian College, Cincinnati Bible College and Seminary, and California Coast University. He is currently completing the final leg of a Ph.D. in Management. The Lucas' have served in Uruguay and Ukraine. Doug is the editor of "Brigada Today," an e-mail journal sent out each week to 1000+ subscribers.

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