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success stories

GARRISON BREWING COMPANY LTD.

Tapping into success

Before Brian Titus got his business off the ground, he made sure he did his homework first.

"I spent months doing research and just learning about what was out there," says the President and General Manager of Halifax-based Garrison Brewing Company Ltd., a highly successful micro-brewery that he founded in 1997.

At that time, beer was a whole new business for the naval diving officer, so he first visited other micro-breweries in Newfoundland and British Columbia to learn the ropes. "People felt comfortable sharing their knowledge with me, and it was time well-spent. There's a lot of camaraderie in this industry, and I was able to gain invaluable insight," he says.

Looking back, Titus takes pride in having put together a comprehensive business plan to attract financing, including a BDC loan under the Young Entrepreneur Financing Program (now replaced by Co-Vision.) "It took about five months to put the plan together. It was a real dream for me to start this business and I wasn't going to let it fall through," he says. His sheer determination paid off when the company immediately attracted investors and was able to purchase costly equipment to brew his darker ales using traditional brewing methods.

Titus emphasizes that the company had to overcome a few obstacles along the way. "People in Nova Scotia are traditionally domestic-beer drinkers so we first had to get our product out there and prove ourselves," he says. To get his beer selling in the same hot spots as larger breweries, the company innovated by offering its product in smaller twenty-litre kegs, which are ideal for fitting into tight places in bars. "We eliminated the need for expensive cooler systems, and once we got our beer in the hands of consumers, I knew the company was going to take off," he adds.

Titus' instinct was right because after one year in business, Garrison Brewing saw 50% growth. Five years later, the company now produces 600,000 bottles of beer a year with a minimal staff of four full-time people, and still maintains five- to six-percent annual growth. "We've had to stay on our toes to keep our market share nonetheless," he says. For instance, rather than go the traditional advertising route, the company markets its products by sponsoring



Garrison Brewing Company Ltd. owner, Brian Titus (front left), and BDC Account Manager, Matthew Fraser (back left).

a local jazz festival and film festival. "Those events fit our profile very well. We sponsor sports too, but in our case, we work with squash tournaments rather than hockey or football," he says.

Now that his company is maturing, Titus has some words of wisdom to share with entrepreneurs starting up today. "In the beginning, be prepared to really focus on your goals, and don't let go of them, no matter what," he concludes.