



“ I left property management to solve a problem, and that’s what we’re doing.”

A Sound Proposition

WHILE NEGOTIATING NOISE COMPLAINTS BETWEEN TENANTS, JOHN BIALK CAME UPON AN IDEA FOR A MULTIMILLION-DOLLAR BUSINESS. *by Daniel Bortz*

JOHN BIALK, 48, NESHKORO, WIS.

THEN

RENTAL PROPERTY
MANAGER

NOW

INVENTOR OF A
NOISE DETECTOR

SIX YEARS OF WORKING at a nonprofit offering rental housing to low-income families taught John Bialk just how precious quiet can be. He frequently fielded noise complaints from tenants—from late-night parties to loud TVs. And these issues often led to nasty feuds between neighbors. “I’d see cars keyed, tires flattened, physical threats,” says the Neshkoro, Wis., resident. “As a property manager, you sit at your desk waiting for bad things to happen.” In the meantime, he came up with a solution: a noise-monitoring system that works on a wireless network to alert landlords to problems.



SOUND THE ALARM A landlord can set Quietyme based on his preferences—say, to ping him by email if the noise level goes above 90 decibels between 8 p.m. and 10 a.m.

In hopes of finding a partner with technical expertise to help create the product, Bialk attended a local startup conference in 2012; there he met computer programmer Jonathan Narwold. Soon after, the duo were accepted into a three-month business accelerator, which included a \$20,000 investment and help making a prototype. Afterward they raised \$300,000 from affiliated investors to take the device, Quietyme, to market.

In January 2013, Bialk left his job to focus on Quietyme. “My wife

wasn’t thrilled I was starting a business so late in my career,” says Bialk. “But I believed in this product.” And with their three kids grown, their living costs were modest, allowing him to take a chance.

Bialk and Narwold hit the ground running. Via cold calls, they built a solid customer base of landlords and hotel managers. And along the way, they found another market: hospitals.

Seeing a chance to expand and having proved they could build the technology, Bialk and Narwold were able to raise \$980,000 more last summer, allowing them to hire 19 people and bring R&D in-house.

In 2014 revenues hit \$300,000. The business isn’t yet in the black, but it could be by next summer, says Bialk, who has already found his new path personally profitable: “I left property management to solve a problem, and that’s what we’re doing. It’s a good feeling to have when I go to sleep at night.” **M**

BY THE NUMBERS

6 months

HOW LONG HE WENT WITHOUT A SALARY. To supplement his half of the accelerator grant, Bialk cashed in a \$40,000 401(k)—his whole nest egg—to cover his and his wife’s living expenses. “We needed to scale the business and couldn’t if we were taking money out,” he says.

\$60,000

WHAT HE WILL EARN IN 2015. After the first six months, Bialk and Narwold each began taking a \$40,000 annual salary. Following the second round of funding, they both upped their pay. Bialk is now making as much as he did prior to starting the company.

40%

EQUITY IN THE BUSINESS BIALK RETAINS. A 10% stake in the company went to Narwold, 20% went to the accelerator, and another 30% was given to investors. While Bialk sacrificed all of his retirement savings for startup costs, he says his shares in Quietyme are now worth \$4.2 million based on a recent valuation.



STARTUP

CREATE A WEBSITE THAT SELLS YOUR BIZ

A surprising 45% of U.S. and U.K. small businesses don’t have websites, a 2014 survey by Internet services company Hibu found. Without your own URL, you’ll miss a chance to drive sales. Plus 56% of consumers recently polled by Weebly said they don’t trust a business that has no web presence. Build a site that sells with these tips:

GREET CUSTOMERS. Your homepage must capture people instantly. Focus on visuals, like a carousel of product photos. Include a shot of the team; faces help people establish trust, says Patrick Schwedtfeger, author of *Marketing Shortcuts for the Self-Employed*.

EARN THEIR BUSINESS. Don’t go straight for a hard sell. Instead, lead with value: Blog posts offering rich content that uses the right keywords (use Google AdWords to find them) build credibility and draw traffic, says Atlanta small-biz web designer Tom Nguyen.

CLOSE THE DEAL. “Businesses do all this work to perfect their sites but forget to ask for a purchase,” says Rebecca Murtagh, author of *Million Dollar Websites*. Use a clickable call to action (like “Buy now”) to convert shoppers to customers. —DANIEL BORTZ