

Tag-Team Success in Data Collection VISION+VALUES

We go way back. Back about 30 years, although not quite to our time at Baylor. We were two years apart at Baylor and never met on campus, but we found out later we had mutual friends and were both presidents of Mortar Board. We first met at Andersen Consulting (now Accenture) in Dallas in 1989. We got to know each other playing pick-up basketball after work. Little did we know then that we would end up building a global business together.

That's how we met. It's a story that almost didn't happen because we both left Accenture to pursue separate careers. John went on to work at Booz-Allen and then The Dallas Symphony. Kurt pursued his MBA at Dartmouth, overlapped briefly with John at Booz-Allen, and then rejoined Accenture. Our careers were moving in different directions.

by **KURT KNAPTON**
BBA '89
and **JOHN ROTHWELL**
BBA '87

But a new business opportunity called the internet began to pull us back together. In 1999, John co-founded e-Rewards, Inc., and convinced Kurt to join the internet startup. The company's idea was to reward people for their time viewing and responding to targeted email offers. Shortly thereafter, however, the dot-com bubble burst.

The company survived what Kurt terms a "nuclear winter" by pivoting and becoming a digital data collection company focused on the market research industry. Back then, consumer data was collected by survey telemarketers with a knack for disturbing people by phone in the middle of dinner. e-Rewards pioneered a better approach for collecting data by deploying

surveys over the web and rewarding people for their time answering questions. That business change made all the difference. e-Rewards grew to be the largest company of its kind in the U.S. and then—after a European acquisition and name change to Research Now, Inc.—the largest in the world.

Both of us have moved in and out of the company during its history. Kurt returned to Research Now as chief executive officer (CEO) in 2011, and John re-joined him in 2012 as chief operating officer (COO). By the time we sold the company to a private equity firm in 2015, it had more than \$300 million in annual revenue, 25 offices around the world, 1,400 employees, and more than 3,000 clients.

Throughout the ups and downs of the business, we always seemed to bring out the best in each other. Our takeaways from shared success are: 1) build on a common foundation, 2) work with good people and 3) remain flexible.

FOUNDATION We built Research Now on a bedrock of shared values and ethical practices informed by our faith. Our Baylor heritage was a foundational element for both our business dealings and friendship. With that foundation, we found success. Our results were achieved the right way. The online data industry has some questionable practices. At Research Now, we put 'permission-based' in our mission statement and remained true to guiding principles such as respondent privacy and a fair value exchange for respondents.

PEOPLE One of the first things Kurt did as CEO was call John and say, 'Let's get the band back together.' We've each reported to the other during our careers, and we are OK with that. We work well together because our strengths are complementary. We both believe that people make the difference in the success of an organization. We've all had people we enjoyed working with and people we didn't. The key is going back to the ones you enjoy working with. Always try to work with good people you trust—who you value on a personal and professional level.

FLEXIBILITY After the dot-com crash, we were running out of money. We went from 40 employees down to two. Our shift to market research saved us. It was forced adaptation. Failure isn't always fatal, but failure to change is usually fatal. Change creates opportunity, and flexibility is required to seize the opportunity.

What have we been up to these days?

Now, we're independently advising and investing in the entrepreneurial ventures of others instead of starting them. We work with organizations in both the for-profit and not-for-profit space. We are co-advisers and investors in several startups together, including a few sourced through the Baylor Angel Network (BAN). It's rewarding and fun to help other entrepreneurs avoid mistakes and find their own way to success. 📌

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