

# Entrepreneur

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## MY+STORY

## Twelve years and counting

**Faisal Farooqui**, Founder and CEO of leading consumer review social network MouthShut.com, recalls his first three years at the venture when dreams and a steely resolve were all he had

**L**ike everyone, I am scared of failure. I was then, when I began and I am now, 12 years into the journey. But the thought of failure did not just scare me. It also motivated me. As I write this, we are well into Ramadan, the holy month of fasting for Muslims. The thought of going without food and water is a deterrent for many, but for those having faith in the word of God, Ramadan is a month that tests your faith to the fullest. Therefore, starving is not scary but a motivating force.

Good old Winston Churchill, of the cigar and war fame, had many quotations flowering in his garden. I pluck one little rose to sum up my journey—"Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm." Well, it wasn't a series of failures that led to my current success. In fact as Churchill again spouted—"Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts". It has been a long journey of perseverance, moments of self-doubt and the courage to bounce back. That is usually how a "successful" entrepreneur is going to sum up his journey.

### BEING ARJUNA

Arjuna, the brave warrior, with his penchant for unwavering concentration—remember the fish he shot in the eye—can be summed up as a role

model of sorts. There the prize was Draupadi and in the case of businesses it would be the bottomline.

The *Mahabharata* is a storehouse of stories which meander slowly into our everyday lives. Arjuna, again, finds part in this narrative I share with you. Standing before the gargantuan Kaurava army, his resolute mind wavered. With trepidation conquering his warrior intentions, he expressed his doubts to his *saarhi* (charioteer), Krishna. "How can I kill my own kin?"

As an entrepreneur, the beginning of the journey is always filled with doubt. MouthShut.com was started in a small room in a suburb of Mumbai

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in 2000. We had no real resources to speak of except a vision to provide the consumer a platform that he could use to voice his opinion on products and services. But reaching this point also called for a combination of planning and calculated risk.

In 1999-2000, things were not exactly looking up for the dotcom industry. The internet bubble had gone bust and the huge marketing budgets had fallen apart. Launching another product on the internet was not exactly the most wise decision, or so opined so many of

my well-wishers. Also, in those days, leaving a plush job in the US to return to India was not the most advised and encouraged decision. But I did set up the company but people were like—"oh a review platform, Indians are criers, you will get only negative, hate-filled write-ups."

Also, the way the idea came about may not have enthused a lot of supporters. The idea was originally dreamt by me while taking a college class on magazine writing. Later on, the book section of Amazon.com inspired me. I wanted to take the concept of user-generated reviews on books to a wider range. Over the years, I am glad that

we have busted so many myths. We survived not just the dotcom but all future busts including the worldwide recession. We are still healthy and booming. From a one-man organization we have grown to hundred and more. We have the best possible talent working for MouthShut.com, which is the most transited platform for not just consumers looking to buy a new product, but also brand managers looking to understand how consumers are talking about them.

### THE INITIAL YEARS

But the first few years were grueling. The biggest challenge was to convince myself to take the big leap. Convincing family was tough as well. I had to take a call. One day, when folks back

in the US were waiting for me at dinner, I quietly boarded a flight to India. Mumbai was calling.

Every country has its unique set of problems. In India, renting an office space is more expensive than it is in Dubai. However, one of the reasons I decided to set up operations in India was because the market here, despite the dotcom bust, was just right for a brand new concept—such as the one heralded by MouthShut.com.

Today is a great time to be an entrepreneur in India. In Dubai, the market is small while in the US the market has reached a saturation point. Cynics point out that setting up a business can be tough because of various laws and regulations. While this may be true to an extent, I believe India is a unique land and has great potential for people trying to do their own thing.

When I look back, things do look surreal. Dotcoms were not considered respectable in the Indian business community. Swimming against the tide was not easy but I chose to do so. You simply need to have the guts. Live with your dream, unfurl it on your fist and see it take a life of its own. Being an entrepreneur involves belief in the self; this I say in retrospect. There is no set formula. Every entrepreneur has to figure out what will work for him. Instinct plays a big role. What will work is not certain. In my case, I just kept backing myself.

Starting from an 8-by-8 room, I decided to wear multiple hats and kept doffing them to each role I performed. There were times when I even picked and transferred calls, wondering where all of this was going to lead to. The path was less trodden as I was working on a vague and ambiguous concept of user-generated content. Dotcoms were falling like ninepins and I was charting out plans for the future without even a proper office and a marketing budget.

At that point, my major worries were if the phone lines were working. A few hours later, I would be helping the lead software engineer fix a bug in his code. Then there were positions to

fill. Our company did not have a regular human resource manager, so it was yet another hat I had to wear. I kept performing multiple tasks, knowing fully well that I needed to establish my core team.

### STAYING WITH THE DREAM

The biggest high was establishing my core team—a handful of folks from the earliest days are still around. With the team in place, I knew I could concentrate on the bigger picture—making MouthShut.com a name to reckon with. In the initial years, I approached a leading brand for a possible partnership. A caustic remark there helped me further my resolve. "Mr. Farooqui, user-generated content is no space to be in. Leave it and go back to the US to your job." Twelve years down the

line, I am still with my dream, piping up newer narratives and bigger dreams. Looking back, I knew I was not setting up a chemical factory or something as tangible as that. Back then, when India was still developing as an economy, setting up factories and the like were the only wise business decisions one could take. Dotcom was a cursed word then, an imaginary world that would crumble faster than a cookie. The cookie is still there, to be savored with sweetened tea, Indian style. To sum up, my first three-odd years were adventurous—there were tons of revenue to speak of and the years ahead were uncertain. But with a resolute vision and a dependable team, we managed to pull things together. As they say: "It happens only in India." ■

