

MARKETING

Basic Funeral's Dominic Mazzone on What it Takes to be an Entrepreneur

By David Wolinsky | Tuesday, Jun 19, 2012 | Updated 1:52 PM CDT

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It's a cliché to say someone has seen it all, but, well, Dominic Mazzone has certainly seen a lot. Today, he's the co-founder of [Basic Funerals](#) a licensed funeral provider, formed in 2009, that prides itself on changing the industry by slashing its costs and working out of non-funeral chapels.

Anyway, it was a twisty road that brought Mazzone to this point. He was born in Chicago, moved to San Diego when he was 13 and then started his first business, detailing, when he was 16. From there, he's dabbled in just about anything you could imagine or fabricate: promoting American bands in Tijuana, selling strawberries on the street, selling skincare, working as a professional musician, dealing real estate, working in corporate telecom, running a small Internet consulting company, running a web-hosting company, working in a small investment firm and even working on the theater production of the Buddy Holly Story.

But it wasn't until he asked an acquaintance of his, Eric Vandermeersch, who owns the gym he belonged to to help move some furniture that he realized his current business opportunity. Turns out Eric is a licensed funeral director and he got out of the industry because it "turns people into used car salesmen." Dominic recognized the opportunity to shake things up and just, as Eric said, "give people what they want" and nothing more. Since 2009, the company has swelled from Ontario to Illinois, Colorado and California.

I gave Dominic a call to discuss his fascinating trajectory that led him here, where he hopes to go next and what it takes to be an entrepreneur.

Through all your different jobs, was running a funeral company ever a big goal of yours?

Dominic Mazzone: [Laughs.] No. How many guys do you know that go, "Hey, I really wanna start a funeral company." You know what? I think it's just one of those magic moments where

you get a guy from the industry who really knows what's going on combined with a guy that understands business and you make a perfect marriage between those two things. That's what happened. I love business. I'm crazy about business. I love, love, love business. It didn't matter to me.

What I loved about this business we were taking a totally antiquated industry and turning it upside-down. That's what I loved about it. I really also enjoyed the fact that we're really helping people. We're about half the price of a traditional funeral provider. I've run a lot of businesses, and I haven't run a lot that really, truly help your everyday consumer. That's what made it really cool. It feels good. It's awesome.

So what advice do you have for people who feel their careers are stuck or they're working jobs they don't want to in order to eventually do something more fulfilling?

Dominic Mazzone: I worked in the big corporations, right? I've worked in great situations and I've worked in bad situations. You're totally surrounded at all times by people that either are just fine with their jobs or hate their jobs. In the corporate world I find that a lot of people don't get a chance to get excited and show their stuff. There's a lot of brilliant people sitting in a lot of places and they don't get noticed. It's really difficult working for a corporation.

My advice for someone who's sitting in a job and saying, "I hate this job?" Well, do something about it! You can't sit and languish and all of a sudden you're at retirement age and you're gonna look at yourself and say, "Hey, what the heck did I do with my life?" That's a sad place to be, right? So you gotta do something about it. I see a trend happening, too. I think we're seeing a lot of people that are unfulfilled in their jobs, and that's how you create entrepreneurs.

You think there's been a rise in people being dissatisfied?

Dominic Mazzone: I think so.

I agree with you, but why do you think that is?

Dominic Mazzone: I think it's a combination of a few different things. The expectations are different now. A lot of employees now I think don't get a chance to breathe. I think the other thing is we're reaching almost like a self-actualization period with employees where companies that say they care about them or care about what they think -- people are starting to realize that they don't. They don't care about what they think. "We don't care about you, we don't care about you think." There's a story every other week or month or whatever of people getting laid off and people's pensions that they thought they were gonna get that they're not gonna get. So, you end up with a disconcerted employee.

It's easy for us because we're a small company, but we spend a ton of time with our employees. Whether it's right on the front line all the way up into the director levels where, "What do you guys think? What do you think's going on? What do you think we could do better? Why isn't this happening?" And then take what they are doing and take action.

I'll tell you. I'd been through so many team meetings where it's all, "Rah rah rah!" We had a team meeting last week and I said, "I feel that we're the best at what we do." And I had one guy raise his hand and go, "Yeah, but this part of it doesn't work." And instead of going, "Yeah, well, you know, that's fine..." I stopped the entire meeting and said, "Fantastic. Thank you for raising your hand. Let's talk about that and fix that right now. Tell me what you think. Tell me why that doesn't work. Tell me what you're actually talking about." And we sat there and I put the whole meeting on hold to fix that issue. I think it was great for everybody because everyone went, "Holy crap, if we say something you're really going to listen to us?" That's how you make a good company great. That's how you make it fantastic. And I've never had that situation. I've always been in the situation in the corporate world where they want to keep you down, so far down. I think it's a terrible thing.

You've had a bunch of different jobs. Is Basic Funerals the job you want to have for the foreseeable future, or did you think about all the ones you had, too?

Dominic Mazzone: The ones I had in the past, I was always striving for something more. As far as the job I have now? I really enjoy it and I love running the company. But there may be a time where I'm not good anymore and I'm not the right guy. Even as co-founder of the company I might one day say, "Hey, guess what, let's bring somebody else who can do this job better than

me." That's what I think makes a really great leader, someone who says, "Hey, I'm not the right guy to lead anymore." That's a hard thing to do.

Without naming names, I've had so many jobs where the managers and bosses had no business being in charge of anyone.

Dominic Mazzone: Yeah, yeah. You say that and I've been like, "I cannot believe this guy has this job. I can't believe this guy is leading us because he needs to be lead so badly." I think the end of my corporate career was when I stopped getting bosses that I couldn't learn from anymore. I feel like you can learn from everybody and there's no question, but I started seeing a trend where I started getting bosses that I wasn't learning from. I felt like I was doing more of the teaching than I was being taught.

Is there a way people can tell whether they've got "the right stuff" to be an entrepreneur? In other words, what if people are actually just difficult to work and don't care whether they're being challenged? Is there a way those people themselves can tell? In other words, just because you're not being challenged doesn't necessarily mean you should go into business for yourself.

Dominic Mazzone: That's a great question. I'm going to use an example and see if I can help answer the question with that. I have a buddy who has the most brilliant, beautiful mind you've ever seen. Like, the ideas that he comes with and everything are incredible. But he just cannot execute for the life of him. He gets really excited about the idea for three or four weeks and then that's it. It's gone. I look at him and I go, "Wow, my fear for you is you're going to come up with a great idea and you're going to want to run with it and then get bored immediately." There's a lot of different skills, and you'll hear about all these skills and you'll go, "Yeah, that all sounds fine." But the one skill that you really need is you just have to be tenacious. You have to drag yourself through it whether it's fun or not fun.

Thinking about a business in terms of a movie trailer, it seems exciting. But when you actually have to do it day-to-day and in-and-out, that's where it gets really tough. Because it's not all --

Car chases and explosions.

Dominic Mazzone: That's right, that's right! If you're being a difficult employee, I think a bigger question there would be, "Okay, where do you think you would actually be happy?" If you think that would be running your own business, okay, then the next question would be, "Do you have some of the parts? Are you really persistent, can you be positive even when the world is crashing down on you to keep pushing forward?" Even the most positive people get the crap beaten out of them. You gotta learn how to keep going forward. If you feel like you just don't have these things and you just want a job and you don't want to work very hard, then keep the job you got. If your goal is to not work hard, then having your own business is not going to work.

The end result of having your own business and it working out really well and being wildly successful is, yeah, you may get to a point in your life where you don't have to work. If you can see all the way to that finish line? Fantastic. But if you think that's going to come in the first month or the first year or the first three years, you're totally wrong. It's just not gonna happen.



David Wolinsky is a freelance writer and a lifelong Chicagoan. In addition to currently serving as an interviewer-writer for Adult Swim, he's also a columnist for EGM. He was the Chicago city editor for The Onion A.V. Club where he provided in-depth daily coverage of this city's bustling arts/entertainment scene for half a decade. When not playing video games for work he's thinking of dashing out to Chicago Diner, Pizano's, or Yummy Yummy. His first career aspirations were to be a game-show host.

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