



Success Story: New Business Models and Giving Back

David Foster has been developing new businesses since he was a boy with a paper route.

By John Byrd

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Fairfax County native David Foster, 46, has always been enterprising. As a boy, he expanded a thriving paper route by hitching a trailer to his moped. Chatting with homeowners while collecting receipts led to a parallel lawn care business. Soon, the trailer carried newspapers and weed whackers.

Then people on the route were asking for Foster's help at tasks he was really passionate about: home repair and construction.

By his junior year at Lake Braddock Secondary School, the 16-year-old had signed on for the county's groundbreaking FATE Program (Foundation for Applied Technical Education). School guidance counselors tried to nudge him away from too much "vo-tech" — his father, Bob Foster, is after all a Harvard MBA. But the boy growing up in West Springfield and Burke knew he had a knack for the building business, and he was eager to get started.

Foster's passion bloomed when the newly enrolled college freshman applied for and received his Class A Virginia state contractor's license. In short order, he was juggling business ownership responsibilities with a full academic load. Though not yet old enough to buy a beer, he was employing five full-time workers and executing remodeling contracts in excess of \$100,000. Foster attended NVCC Construction Management program while launching his remodeling business.

"Give people more than they expect," said Foster. "I find this sends a message that you can be trusted even ... even when you're just a kid, that you're committed to your client's long term satisfaction."

Foster, who now lives in Clifton, has often been cited as a residential remodeling industry leader, elected to Remodeling Magazine's Big 50 Hall of Fame while still in his 30s. His 27-year-old Lorton-based residential construction business, Foster Remodeling Solutions, has a loyal and growing clientele — even in the slow times.

"Out-performance" has always been his mantra. Opening a dealer showroom so as to pass on dealer discounts helped the firm's business development process. On premise, he provides CADD (computer-aided design) systems and staff architects to help people research ideas. And then, there's the handyman and home maintenance practice — a specialty niche many in the industry have tried, and abandoned.

LAST FALL, Foster launched www.DIYEstimator.com, an advanced online remodeling service. Like many of Foster's brainchildren, the Web portal is both a



Donated Photo
David Foster

About FATE

In 1970, Fairfax County Public Schools called on its business and professional community for assistance in providing a comprehensive educational program that would develop vocational skills for participating high school students. An entrepreneurial component prepares students for a successful transition into the workplace. The result was the formation of a partnership now called the Foundation for Applied Technical Education, Inc. (FATE), consisting of representatives from business and professional organizations to provide resources, support, and career opportunities to students enrolled in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. For more on the Foundation for

harbinger of new market possibility, and user-friendly.

Applied Technical
Education, see
www.fatefacts.org.

DIY visitors log onto the site, enter a target room's square footage and spatial configuration, then choose finish work preferences.

The site provides clear visuals and line-item costs, and visitors can revise to their heart's content. Once choices are submitted, the homeowner receives a detailed work order; a company representative follows up by phone within 24 hours.

"The market is always looking for something better," Foster contends, "so it's important to take the lead — even when there are lots of steps, and lots of unknowns."

Foster experimented with his Web portal for five years before launching it last spring.

"We had the architecture worked-out, but weren't satisfied with online speeds. Naturally, we had to evaluate the program with all types of computers and servers. The important thing is to get it right."

TALENT CULTIVATION being the essential job of leadership, Foster also attests to an abiding faith in the importance of continued skills development.

"That's one of the reasons I chaired the FATE program, and still serve on the board," he said. "A worker's mastery of their own skills is my best assurance that our quality requirements will be delivered." Foster's two children attend Robinson Secondary School.

Several years ago Foster developed a protocol for testing entry-level carpentry skills. To demonstrate mastery of variety of construction disciplines, prospective new hires were asked to build a scaled, 10-by-8-foot playhouse from scratch.

The payoff: the company gained a realistic picture of a candidate's field strengths in a dozen areas. The playhouses were donated to local churches and pre-schools.

"It's a model that creates lots of winners," Foster said.



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