

The Curious Case of the Dead Bees and What it Tells us About the Power of Collaboration

There is a fascinating story about honeybees, their mysterious disappearance, and the unlikely team that solved the puzzle of their tragic death. You may have heard about “colony collapse”, or perhaps noticed the absence of buzzing around your garden in recent years. Bee pollination is responsible for over \$15 billion in added crop value in North America, so it’s pretty clear that this was a problem worth solving. Until now, the explanation for the phenomenon has been largely guesswork, but thanks to collaboration between a team of military scientists and a group of university entomologists, we can now be pretty sure the bees fell victim to a fungus that was in league with a virus.

So what does this have to do with business and entrepreneurship? People who fight wars and people who study insects don’t typically hang out together, but this fortuitous alliance resulted in solving a problem that neither the military nor the scientists could have solved on their own. And I’m not just talking about resources and equipment; I’m talking about perspective, and the value of putting your head together with someone who tackles problems from an entirely different point of view. That’s something that entrepreneurs should be thinking about every day, because brilliant things happen when you collaborate with an unlikely partner.

- Timberland founder and CEO Jeff Swartz talks about his partnership with a not-for-profit called Green Rubber, which studies the impact of rubber tire waste and has perfected a technology to recycle it. Manufacturers and environmentalists are frequently at odds, but a dialogue between the two resulted in a strategic partnership: Timberland now uses Green Rubber’s recycled tires on the soles of its boots. Swartz says the arrangement isn’t just good for the environment; it’s also good for his business.
- Tom Szaky’s company, TerraCycle, collects post-consumer waste, such as Oreo cookie wrappers, and turns them into entirely new products such as backpacks and pencil cases. While Szaky’s “upcycling” business has an authentic environmental aura, it’s his partnerships with big companies like Kraft and Nabisco that make the business work. Those large packaged goods companies sponsor the collection brigades that provide TerraCycle with used packaging. It’s an unlikely alliance, but one that gives the big companies a “green” image, while providing TerraCycle with low cost or free raw materials.

Having alliances and collaboration can change the way you solve problems, approach new markets, or run your business. It's very easy to dismiss the business insight from a member who represents a category that's not a natural "fit" for your category, but by doing so you are rejecting a perfectly good opportunity to view the world through a new lens. Our chapter represents a diverse group of businesses – taking the time to do a business building interview with members that are not in your power group will broaden your view of business and can give you new tools to recognize and solve problems within your business.

Loosely based on an article by Donna Fenn