

# The rise of Generation Plus

By Alec Bruce

THOUGH THEIR POOLS OF WISDOM MAY BE SHALLOW, THEIR RESERVOIRS OF DERRING-DO ARE AS DEEP AS AN OCEAN TRENCH. THEY ARE THE NEXT GENERATION OF ATLANTIC CANADIAN ENTREPRENEURS — THOSE MEN AND WOMEN AGE 20 AND YOUNGER WHO NEVER MET A CHALLENGE THEY COULDN'T EMBRACE, A COMPUTER THEY COULDN'T MASTER OR A DREAM THEY COULDN'T LIVE.

**It was someone very old**, near the end of his days, afflicted by all the diseases and disappointments of his rough span on Planet Earth, who once coolly observed, “The surest way to corrupt a youth is to instruct him to hold in higher esteem those who think alike than those who think differently.” Which may be another way of saying it takes a lifetime to become young.

If it does, don't bother dispensing German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's advice to a new cohort of young entrepreneurs who have no trouble at all embracing their inner children if only because, by every definition, outwardly they still are.

Meet Generation Plus, the 20-and-under-somethings who are making their own way in the world of business — with or without help from their elders — decades ahead of the conventional schedules established by the professional life-coach career-planning industry. While their predecessors, at their age, mowed lawns, stocked grocery shelves and languished in other minimum-wage ghettos, these folks are luxuriating in the self-esteem that self-employment purchases. And their ranks are growing.

According to recent Government of Canada research on the state of small business and entrepreneurship in the country: “Since 1996, young entrepreneurs have been entering the small- and medium-sized business marketplace at an average of approximately three times the rate per year of entrepreneurs over the age of 45. Today, young entrepreneurs are found in all sectors of the economy. What's more, businesses owned by youth are more likely to be high growth and financially viable.”

All of which may seem counterintuitive. After all, the barriers to growth facing even

the most seasoned small businessman and woman are notoriously legion, especially in Atlantic Canada: lousy access to bank capital for start-up, expansion, equipment, and marketing; insufficient resources for innovation and export development; comparatively inconstant and unskilled labour markets; and the seemingly ageless presumption, purveyed by many of the “gainfully employed,” that entrepreneurship is something you do when you can't find or keep a “real job”.

So what does the 20-and-under crowd know that the rest of us don't? Are they smarter, braver and more diligent? Are they more educated, better skilled and less concerned about making a quick buck? Or are they simply too young, naïve and dumb to understand that their eventual failure is inevitable? (Says dear, old mom: Don't play with that spreadsheet, junior, you'll poke your eye out).

Or is there some strange, almost inefable, combination of factors and qualities that renders this generation...well, Generation Plus?

The questions aren't merely academic. In short order, the most populous cohort of workers, entrepreneurs and professionals in modern times — the baby boomers — will abandon the pitch for their summer homes and winter retreats, taking with them their knowledge, experience, productivity and money. On whose enthusiasm, ingenuity, and work ethic will we then depend for the long-term safety and progress of our economies other than the youngest — and youngest at heart — among us?

Clearly, we would profit by getting to know some of them just a little better.





# World domination, one site at a time

**NICHOLAS MACLEOD** (20)

**BUSINESS: FUTURE WEB DESIGN**

**LOCATION: CHARLOTTETOWN, PEI**

**INDUSTRY: INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

**YEARS IN OPERATION: 7**

**For** Nicholas MacLeod, there was no eureka, epiphany or otherwise trenchant moment of what self-help books and career manuals like to call self-actualization. There was, however, a 65-year-old dog trainer who needed some help with a web site.

“She was a friend of the family,” the University of Prince Edward Island business major recounts, to elucidate how he started his own enterprise in 2003 at the tender age of 13. “She wanted to promote her pure breeds, but she didn’t know much about the Internet. So, I offered to set her up online. It worked out pretty well.”

So well, in fact, his client told a friend, who told another friend and then another. Before he knew it, MacLeod found himself at the helm of a bona fide growing concern specializing in web site development and hosting, domain registration, graphic design and IT support. A keen follower of marketing and technology trends, he recently rebranded his company, Future Web Design, to respond more efficiently to the growing demand for personalized e-commerce solutions.

“When I started out,” the Charlottetown-based entrepreneur explains, “I was doing brochure-style web sites, which

were static groupings of pages without a whole lot of interactivity. Now we are seeing a big change in the area of content management. Everybody is looking for current information on web sites. So we now enable our customers with the ability to do their own updates and customization, instead of having to rely on us to do all this for them all of the time, which would cause delays. After we theme a site and design it, we turn over the content management to the client through their administrative account.”

Over the past seven years MacLeod has managed to expand his service base from Prince Edward Island to the rest of the Atlantic provinces, British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and into the United States. Meanwhile, over the past three years, his firm has averaged revenue growth of 60 per cent. And though he prefers not to divulge exact dollar amounts, he confirms that the operations have been robust enough to support him, pay for his education and for the services of a handful of similarly skilled colleagues when business threatens to bottleneck his busy days.

All of which snagged him an Advancing Canadian Entrepreneurship (ACE) award last year (something he said at the time gave him “the incentive to continue to work hard, and set and strive for larger goals.”). Since then, he’s been a featured speaker at the University of

Prince Edward Island and for the Young Millionaires association.

Still, accolades and awards don’t actually motivate him. For MacLeod, the thrill of enterprise is a blood fever he hasn’t been able to shake – not that he’s spent much time searching for a cure. “I got my first computer when I was six,” he says. “My uncle got it for me. It was a laptop, running Windows 3.1. Since then, I’ve always had a computer, and I’ve always been interested in figuring out new things to do with it. In fact, I have three computers sitting on my desk right now doing lots of neat things for my business. Let’s just say technology has always played a big, big part in my life.”

So, in fact, has self-employment, though not always directly. His father and mother, Alan and Juanita, are serial entrepreneurs. They have, at times over the years, run tree-spraying and screen-printing businesses. Today, Alan (an electrician by trade) operates his own firm and Juanita is an all-breed dog groomer. “They’ve always had businesses on the go,” MacLeod says. “I’ve grown up around the kitchen table where there’s always chat about what’s going on, what’s happening with the operations. I picked up a lot of stuff. I couldn’t help it.”

Certainly, something he couldn’t help absorb “around the kitchen table” was a work ethic that would put any one of

## A youthful profile in energy, education and diversity in Canada

CHARACTERISTICS	ENTREPRENEURS AGES 15-29	ENTREPRENEURS 30 & OLDER
GENDER	19% female; 67% male*	14% female; 65% male*
MINORITY STATUS	12% visible minorities	8% visible minorities
EDUCATION	75% with post-secondary	60% with post-secondary
MANAGERIAL EXPERIENCE	78% with more than 5 years	93% with more than 5 years
HOME-BASED	60%	54%
LOCATION	71% urban; 29% rural	74% urban; 26% rural
EXPORT ACTIVITY	7% outside of Canada	11% outside of Canada

\* The rest were mixed-gender operations. Source for all: Statistics Canada, labour force survey (special order) 2006.

North America's capitalist heroes to shame. "It's a busy life," MacLeod says. "If a network goes down at 11 p.m. on a Thursday, I have to be able to respond to that no matter what's going on elsewhere. And, usually, elsewhere means my responsibilities to school. So I'm up for long hours almost every day of the week, and weekends and evenings trying to balance. There are weeks I put in 60 hours on the business and the same amount of time on school work."

In fact, MacLeod is on track to graduate with a four-year degree in business administration in the spring of 2012. "I'm not a straight-A student because I spend so much of my time on the business," he says. "If I get 75 or 80 per cent, I'm happy with my performance. On the other hand, I did make the honour role last year with an overall average of 80 per cent."

Could he do better at his studies? Absolutely, he says. But then again, he asserts, "The sacrifices an entrepreneur has to make. . . well, he just has to make them. For me, there have been all sorts of transitions and challenges since high school in Charlottetown. I went from a business that was part-time to a company that now supports me 100 per cent of the time. That kind of transformation tends to change the way you think about yourself in the world. It tends to adjust your priorities."

Indeed, it does. But would he ever take a "real job"? Would he ever abandon his archly independent purpose in life?

"I get that question a lot," he laughs. "I always say something like, 'Hey I support myself, so I think I have a real job.' That's not to say I wouldn't entertain a job in somebody else's business."

He pauses for a moment, swallows a laugh and then proceeds: "You know what? Here's the truth: The ability to make decisions and act on these instantaneously — I really like that. I would like to continue with that. If you put the time, effort and passion into your true calling, you can be successful at anything you want."

Sure, but what does 20-year-old Nicholas MacLeod want? "I would choose entrepreneurship over anything else," he says.

Which may be just another way of saying: Bring on another 65-year-old dog breeder who needs help with an online presence. Future Web Design is open for anything, especially business.

## Stoked on business

**GEOFF CODERRE (20)**

**BUSINESS:DCMG CLOTHING COMPANY**

**LOCATION: HALIFAX REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY, NS**

**INDUSTRY: ONLINE RETAIL**

**YEARS IN OPERATION: 1**

**The** brand label of Geoff Coderre's new line of clothing invites customers to "Get Stoked," but the invocation could just as well characterize the 20-year-old Dartmouth resident's gritty determination to succeed in business on his own terms. "I definitely want to work for myself," he says simply.

To this end, he and three others began selling their hip, youthful apparel (including t-shirts, underwear and sunglasses) in the greater Halifax marketplace last August. By the end of 2010, revenues of their DCMG Clothing Company amounted to \$8,000 — a modest return to be sure, but a compelling start nonetheless. This year they plan to expand their operations into the online world through their web site: get-stoked.com. And, says Coderre, "We're really hoping to get into a store. We've talked to the retail chain Bootlegger and we're in the process of getting liability insurance. It's really exciting."

In fact, generating a buzz has been a running theme in Coderre's life. The youngest of six, the third-year commerce student at Saint Mary's University — who has lived in Ontario, New Brunswick, and Washington State before moving to Nova Scotia — has had trouble sitting still for very long. His entrepreneurial proclivities emerged early. "I have been involved in business activities from a very young age," he says. "I started with online communities and web sites."

One of his first ventures was a Facebook group, "Canada vs. America: The Countdown to One Million." Its premise was straightforward enough: build membership sufficient to attract advertising and marketing revenue. "It was like a friendly competition between the two countries," Coderre explains. "Within three months, I had about 600,000 members. That's when I went to YoungEntre-



Photo: Mike Tompkins

preneur.com, an online forum catering to people like me, and wrote up a post offering the group, for a small fee, as an alternative advertising method for Canadian social networkers. After several offers, a bit of a bidding war, I settled on \$1,500."

Other forays into the world of private enterprise have been somewhat less successful. When he was 15, he started a gaming website that provided credits for online purchases. "That went on for about five months," he says. "But I kept running into problems maintaining a stable host. The site kept going down, so I just decided to move on from there."

He also launched Revupedia.org, an all-purpose reviews site that provided recommendations on just about everything. But, he says, "It was about 75 per cent done when I ran into some problems. I then started a lawn-care company for one summer and it did fairly well. Eventually, though, I got interested in other things."

In reality, Coderre doesn't perceive these hiccups as failures, but rather as steps along the way to entrepreneurial enlightenment. It's a positive attitude he comes by naturally. "I don't worry about what it takes to run your own business. My mom runs her own property appraisal firm and my step-dad helps her out. I'm happy being busy. On top of everything, I work about 25 hours a week at Future Shop. And now there's the clothing company."

It's enough to keep anyone fresh, keen, determined and, of course, stoked.





# Obstacles as opportunities

**SCOTT OLDFORD** (19)

**BUSINESSES: ESSENTIAL CODING/ADS ON THE MOVE**

**LOCATION: GRAND FALLS-WINDSOR, NL**

**INDUSTRY: MARKETING**

**YEARS IN OPERATION: 6**

**Most** would call his burden enormous. After all, what kind of future can a 19-year-old kid afflicted with dyslexia, short- and long-term memory and audio processing deficits properly expect? Most, however, would be wrong, as they would soon realize after taking the measure of Scott Oldford's singular and astonishing achievements.

Over the past six years, the Grand Falls-Windsor-based entrepreneur has grown one business into one of Atlantic Canada's most successful web design, development and online marketing companies offering everything from e-commerce, content management systems and advertising campaigns to product packaging, signage, community software and strategic planning. Today, Essential Coding employs three full-time professionals to serve 250 customers across the region.

This past January, Oldford launched a new venture, Ads on the Move, which he anticipates could generate revenues approaching \$7 million by the end of its first year of business. "I'm really excited about this," he says. "Essentially, we're matching up business owners with everyday drivers. We're going to pay people to carry advertising on their cars for a designated period. The concept isn't new. What is new is the completely automated, online nature of the matchmaking system. We'll be expanding right across Canada and into the United States later this year."

None of which telegraphs the trepidations of a man concerned about his mental faculties. In fact, discussing them, he seems downright jaunty. "The way it was explained to me when I was seven was that I was a computer that was just a little bit slower than all the

others," he laughs. "It means that when you press the keyboard, it takes a couple of seconds longer than normal for the letters and numbers to show up on the screen. But, hey, what's normal?"

Indeed, not too long ago, he answered his own question in a Government of Newfoundland and Labrador newsletter for entrepreneurs. "I don't want to be normal," he said. "If I were normal, I would be doing whatever I could not to be normal. If we were all normal, we'd be all cookie cut. Our differences are what make people so great."

After all, was it normal when the nine-year-old Oldford began selling eggs to delighted neighbours, impressed by the boy's enterprise and ambition? Eventually, with his grandfather's help, he cornered the local market with a volume of seven dozen a day. He stopped only when his output exceeded the regulated limit allowed for unlicensed producers.

And was it typical child's play when, a year later, he began poking around computers and learning how to program? "I lived on an acreage away from town," he says. "I was so interested in technology at an early age. I met a lot of people online. I developed some clients. By the time I was 13, I was hiring other people to put the programming in. Most of them were at least 25. Three years later, with the help of Youth Ventures in the province, I incorporated Essential Coding and moved into office space. To this day, most of the people I hire are in their late 20s and 30s."

For Oldford, the range of normal is exceedingly broad — a revelation that first came to him in 2008 when he was selected to attend the Top 20 Under 20 national youth awards program in Toronto. There he met a 14 year-old-author, a 12-year-old philanthropic fundraiser for African relief and a youngster who had invented a reliable polygraph machine. "Going up there at 16 and meeting those people was probably the most amazing experience of my life," he declared some time later. "It probably gave me the drive to be where I am now. It gave me the big scope of things, and it gave me the last boost of confidence I needed to say, okay, no matter what your age, who you are, what learning disabilities or other disabilities you have, you can do it."

Now, with Ads on the Move, he's doing it again. "So, you're probably wondering, 'Okay, it can't really be that easy,'" the com-

pany's new web site teases. "They aren't really gonna pay me cash for just putting an advertisement on my vehicle are they?" Actually, that's exactly what we want to do. You just sign up for an account, sign up for a campaign, verify some information for us, and then you get your check in the mail every month. It really is that simple."

Oldford explains the advantage to businesses is the heightened exposure they receive from the rolling stock they brand to carry their message. But, beyond this — and, perhaps, more importantly — the idea is both innovative and fun.

"I have a passion for creating new things and expanding on other people's ideas, on what's already out there," he says. "I have lists and lists of new ideas. I always want to keep expanding and when I see an opportunity, I jump. I don't intentionally diversify. I just like doing something new over and over again."

And that happy, burdensome affliction known as entrepreneurship? "I would sacrifice pretty much anything to do what other people would call work," he says. "To me it's not work. It's something I love to do."

Now, how abnormal is that?

## Youth active in smart business technologies

"Young entrepreneurs are unique in their proportionally higher presence in the knowledge-based economy. Seven per cent of youth-owned SMEs operate in a knowledge-based industry, compared with four per cent of older business owners. Young entrepreneurs also tend to be more engaged in research and development activities. Thirty per cent devoted their investment expenditure to technology acquisition and licensing costs, compared with 26 per cent of firms owned by older entrepreneurs" — *Statistics Canada, Survey on Financing Small and Medium Enterprises, 2006.*

# Working for the man (he's the man)

**SCOTT REINHARDT** (19)

**BUSINESSES: REINHARDT'S DISTRIBUTION/  
GREEN ROOTS LANDSCAPING/HALIFAX ASPHALT CARE**

**LOCATION: HALIFAX REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY, NS  
INDUSTRY: CONSUMER PRODUCTS AND SERVICES  
YEARS IN OPERATION: 4**

**Scott** Reinhardt waxes philosophically about big pictures, positive attitudes, lessons learned and the value of cold, hard cash. "The most important thing in life is living," he says. "It's family and friends. Money comes, money goes."

He ought to know. He's been investing in the stock market since he was 14 (he's 19 now). And, by his own admission, he lost a bundle in the recent economic downturn. Did the experience teach him anything?

"It's all learning curves," he shrugs. "It puts you down for a second, but then you gotta say: so what? So you lost money, but what did you learn? We always learn things along the way."

It's an impressively mature reflection for one so young. But then, this volunteer firefighter and Saint Mary's University student (he's studying towards a Bachelor of Commerce with a major in small business and entrepreneurship) is not the average teenager. He's the sole owner of two successful enterprises, Reinhardt's Distribution (a purveyor of vending machines) and Green Roots Landscaping. Most recently, he registered a third business, Halifax Asphalt Care.

He declines to divulge his commercial revenues, apart from confirming that he's been self-sufficient for "quite a while." The bottom line doesn't motivate him as much as the hunt for more durable, personal rewards. "Being my



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own boss is definitely important to me," he says. "It's what I know. I never want to work for the man. For me, being the boss is just the way it's gotta be. It's huge. I can set my own hours, make my own schedule."

It also permits him to pursue his own vision of customer satisfaction without the annoying impingements of a structured chain of command. In fact, he prides himself on the personal service he provides. "All my businesses are customer-service oriented and I take a hands-on approach," he says. "Who can run your business better than yourself? The answer is nobody. The customers have to like you. That's a big thing in my companies. That's why I send out customer satisfaction surveys and thank-you letters and Christmas cards. It means a lot to people, and these are the people you are going to keep around for a while."

He launched Reinhardt's Distribution in 2007 with two machines. Since then, he has purchased and consolidated the operations of four smaller companies and continues to expand the company with regular investments. Its website describes its competitive advantage in vigorous style: "Regardless of the size of your organization, we have the right vending machine for your location, from small counter-top models to full-size snack and beverage machines." The company serves customers in Halifax, Dartmouth and Cole Harbour.

Green Roots Landscaping, which also serves the greater Halifax area, is only a year old but Reinhardt predicts great things for it. It turned a profit in 2010, and he expects to expand it rapidly this year. "Again," he says, "it's all about the attention to personal care. We do all kinds of things — whatever is needed, from lawn care to concrete steps. I employ people as I need them. One of the biggest jobs we've done involved five guys working on one day."

Once it's fully up and running, Halifax Asphalt Care will specialize in line striping parking lots and pavement sealing. In this, as in his other businesses, Reinhardt has at times turned to his father for advice and assistance. The elder Reinhardt, who works for Nova Scotia Power as a manager of projects and systems support, was also entrepreneurial at an early age.

Still, as every business owner knows, there are some things you just have to work through on your own. "It's trial and error," the young entrepreneur says cheerfully. "If it works, it works; if it doesn't, then you gotta figure out how to fix it." After all, it's about the lessons learned. | ABM