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five thoughts about...

Failing Fast and Getting Over It

with Theodore Agranat, owner and founder of Ceonex.

By [Ben Bradley](#)

November 7, 2005 — Ben Bradley recently spoke with Theodore Agranat, owner and founder of Ceonex, about selling door-to-door, personal resolve and auto repair. [Ceonex](#), a 40-person Web development consultancy in the U.S., Japan, Russia and Canada, serves such clients as Bayer Pharmaceuticals, Berkshire Life, Fidelity National Financial, OrthoMcNeil Pharmaceuticals, Procter & Gamble and Miller Brewing Company.

Agranat, 29 years old, started working when he was 13, translating business negotiations while living in Austria. After founding Ceonex in 1998, he helped grow the company through the dotcom bust. Recently, he developed a way to quantify a user's response to a website.

How did you get from Austria to the Web?

Theodore Agranat: I was born in Russia and my family moved to Austria when I was young. Being multi-lingual (English, Russian, German and a little Dutch), I was able to find work at 13 translating Russian to German.

When I was 15, for a number of reasons, I moved out of my parent's house in Vienna and dropped out of school. Moving out, getting an apartment and supporting myself was a crash course in reality.

When you are young and on your own, the one thing that is always on your mind is how to make money. I was doing whatever I could to get by. I made it through because I was versed in languages and had a natural or innate understanding of the way things work. I learned car repair and would make extra money fixing the odd Mercedes for someone. Since I had no formal automotive repair training, car repair taught me several important lessons: that I could learn anything I put my mind to; how things worked and interacted with each other, and how pieces can form a whole that is far greater than the sum of its parts.

After I had been working on cars for a few years, I came to the U.S. to visit family. My original plan was not to stay, but to figure things out with my parents and then go back to Austria. At around the same time, I also started fixing computers for people. As with cars, when I started I didn't know anything about computers, I had to learn as I went. Everybody at that point was an amateur, but I was a talented amateur and I started designed Web pages for people. A short vacation turned into citizenship,

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and the Web replaced cars as my true love.

What did you like most about the Web?

I loved the idea of communication and collaboration. IRC [Internet relay chat] opened a new world. Now I could communicate with anyone anywhere for very little cost. IRC opened up all my old connections back in Europe and I reconnected with people virtually. The power of this technology blew me away. I knew then that the Web along with all of its related technologies could change the way people work. I was hooked.

In 1998, I figured I had enough experience with the Web. I took some sketches and put them on a laptop, and went door-to-door selling Web design. I didn't sell anything. The closest I came was an insurance company that wanted to hire me to sell insurance. Unfortunately, they didn't want to buy a website, and I didn't want to sell insurance. We parted ways.

My next big idea was a website for a community of graphic artists. The idea was everyone would collaborate on Web design projects. The problem was that not everyone shared the same passion and commitment for the project that I did. A group of creative individuals helping each other out was what I had in mind. I wanted to put a community together, but it failed miserably. I understand then why Communism failed.

What about other mistakes along the way.

I've relied on trial and error throughout my career, and with every trial, there is a lot of error. As I get older, thankfully, I see less and less error.

I have a great resume. I've fixed cars, translated business negotiations and developed and run a Web development firm without an MBA, or even a formal education. I had no expertise in sales or running a business and I didn't know how to move to the next level. I only gained that experience by getting trying, failing, then trying something different. The secret is to fail fast and get over it.

With computers and Web development, it's a bit different, but the lessons in how to effectively facilitate communications and the personal attention necessary in business translation gave me insights that have really helped me build Ceonex.

How did you get from door-to-door Web design to a global company?

After some real-world "sales crash courses," I finally found a few projects that got the company started. After that it was just a matter of taking the opportunities as they came and running with them. We were able to triple our client base during the dotcom bust because, unlike our competitors, we weren't focused on building pretty websites.

A lot of flashy graphics can clutter up a site and make it nearly impossible to navigate. We designed websites with user interaction in mind and were able to develop effective platforms for communicating value to prospects.

What's next?

Last year we opened a lab called Quantemo. It's a usability lab that quantifies the emotional response and mental effort a user experiences when visiting a website. This helps identify usability problems and allows the designers to create a memorable and stress-free user experience. Basically, it's about the importance of communication, from designer to end-user. The same techniques we used in the beginning of the company to increase conversion by providing precise and pragmatic Web design we've been able to develop into a system that can be used to actually

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quantify the user's experience and increase conversion rates.

Increasing conversion rates is all about providing a positive, satisfying experience to the user throughout all touch-points. Think from the user's perspective: Is the site easy to use or frustrating? Is the information straightforward and readily available, or is it shrouded in confusion, or even impossible to find? Does the site speak to real needs: improve efficiency or ROI, make me feel healthy and attractive? Or does it just show me a product and a list of dry features. Give the user a positive and satisfying experience, exceed user expectations and deliver on your promises. It sounds very simple, yet few companies truly follow through with the above.

Ben Bradley (see the [Darwin article](#)) is the managing director of [Growingco.com](#), a research-and-intelligence firm serving manufacturing, technology and security clients. Contact him at ben@growingco.com.

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