4 Principles That Helped a Former White House Official Make Cyber Security More Accessible

President George W. Bush’s one-time Chief Information Security Officer shares his tips for small-business growth.

November 8, 2019 6 min read

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For the first time in history, the greatest threats to institutions and businesses alike are no longer physical. Instead, stealing client information or impairing an organization’s ability to operate is something that’s done predominantly online. With 43 percent of cyber attacks targeting small businesses — and an average of six months before they realize they’ve been compromised — cyber security is becoming more important than ever. But most small businesses don’t have the resources to implement robust protocols. Whether it involves how expensive it is to hire an in-house expert or the price of most outsourced services, access is typically the deal-breaker.

Few people understand this conundrum better than Vince Crisler, who served as the White House Chief Information Security Officer (CISO) under President George W. Bush. Leveraging the added expertise he developed from that executive role, Crisler started a cyber security company, Dark Cubed, and has been working on it for the past five years. Recently, I had the chance to chat with him about how

he approaches building a company looking to make enterprise-grade network security solutions accessible to smaller businesses, and here are four key takeaways from that conversation.

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1. Always think about reducing barriers for customers.

As a general rule, the biggest disadvantages a startup has when competing against giants is that it simply doesn't have access to the same opportunities. Whether you're talking about hiring the smartest people or investing in services that cost a fortune, big companies may not be doing something radically better, but they sure do have more resources to work with.

That is especially the case in the cyber security space. According to Crisler, "Less than 1 percent of the companies in the United States have the resources to implement cyber security in the way that it has been designed toda. Most small- and mid-sized companies do not have budgets nor cyber security experts at their disposal, yet all of the products and services that exist in the market require money, expertise, or both." And for those reasons, Dark Cubed doubled down on the value proposition of catering to those smaller companies.

Whether your company is in the cyber security space or not, leveling the playing field for smaller businesses to compete with giants will both open the market to a lot more potential clients as well as create a value proposition most prospects can't ignore.

2. Taking a simpler approach isn’t necessarily bad.

From blockchain to drones, there are a variety of hot topics in technology today. Sometimes, the hype can be a positive signal pointing you in the right direction of where to go. But at the same time, taking simpler approaches to solve the same problems aren’t materially any worse.

But when Crisler was looking for funding, he noticed that “most investors hate the idea of funding a cyber security company focused on small and medium companies.” Ironically, Dark Cubed’s success was grounded upon the simplicity, automation and affordability that Crisler envisioned. Yet, he adds, “Forces continue to drive cybersecurity companies to complex, fancy tools that target the largest of enterprises, but do nothing to fix the cyber security environment at large.”

Having investors turn him down time and time again allowed the Dark Cubed team to cut through the noise and find their true partners. Ultimately, his interest in providing simple and powerful solutions that address core security problems allowed his team to truly impact smaller, more vulnerable companies. And though it took some more time to build rapport and credibility, they were able to do the one thing all businesses should look to do: Solve their clients’s problems rather than just generate hype.

3. Don’t be afraid to pivot.

Especially in the earliest days of a company, iteration is critical. Being too caught up in optimizing your product can slow you down in reaching the market and receiving user feedback. And without that critical user feedback, you can never be sure that what you’ve made can impact people and

businesses in a big way.

In Crisler's case, Dark Cubed wasn't always exclusively digital. When they first started, he recalls that the center of their early "conceptual architecture was a 'Black Box' that would manage two-way, fully automated anonymous information sharing." This turned out to be the concept Dark Cubed's name was based on, but as the company evolved, it was clear that its hardware solutions took multiple days to deploy, whereas its software solutions took just take a fraction of that. So the company pivoted away from the very concept it was named after.

Taking your business in a new direction can often be a difficult decision to make, but adaptability to the market environment and basing your strategy on how best to optimize value is crucial. Remember, you should have a vision for where your company is going, but you may not always be entirely right about the approach to take to get there.

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4. Avoid being distracted by short-sighted, misaligned opportunities.

As your company continues to grow, more and more opportunities, both monetary and otherwise, will arise. Though they may seem enticing, many of them are more distracting than beneficial. And if you take every seemingly great opportunity, you may find yourself veering further from what your business sought out to do in the first place.

Crisler told me that several years ago, his pressure to focus on high-paying enterprise clients pushed him and his teams to spend months "chasing an opportunity with a large Fortune 50 company." But with a focus on small- and mid-sized companies, Crisler realized that that client was outside of Dark Cubed's

target market and ended up saving time not pursuing that account. Instead, optimizing value for small- and mid-sized companies allowed Dark Cubed to “grow faster than [he] could have hoped.”

As Crisler makes clear, the promise of quick profits can be tempting, but having a strategy that places impact above incentives and aligns with your business’s vision is what will position you to be sustainable in the long term.

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