CREATING A NICHE

Utah is home to unique and unexpected businesses

By Peri Kinder

Utah’s high rate of business success isn’t news anymore. The state continues to lead the nation in low unemployment rates and top-notch economic development, and the number of companies bringing their organizations to the business-friendly state only continues to climb.

But with all the hoopla surrounding such accolades, sometimes the unique stories behind these companies get lost. Meet four unusual businesses in Utah at the forefront of their industries, creating products and services that are changing the world.
NIKOLA MOTOR COMPANY

History is replete with industries utterly destroyed because they didn’t adapt and evolve quickly. Companies like Kodak were left behind after technology and digital images redefined how consumers took photos.

Is the trucking industry next? If Trevor Milton has his way, the trucking industry will use technology to emerge stronger and more vital than ever. Milton is the founder and CEO of Nikola Motor Company, located in Salt Lake City. His ideas are decades ahead of his competition as big companies and individual truck drivers wait to see what happens with his new semi-trucks.

The Nikola One and Nikola Two are hydrogen-powered electric semi-trucks taking the industry by storm. With absolutely zero emissions and a 1,000-mile range on a battery charge, Milton is convinced these trucks are the answer to the finite amount of fossil fuels left on the planet.

“Thi is the end of diesel engines,” Milton says. “We have $4 billion in sales already. Hydrogen is more efficient with no emissions. Everything is included in the price of the trucks from fuel to maintenance to tires and windshield wipers. Drivers will save thousands of dollars each month in operating costs.”

Milton had the idea for the trucks when he was a kid, driving locomotives with his dad who worked for Union Pacific Railroad. He saw the power in the machines and wondered why there were no locomotive semi-trucks. Years later, he started Nikola in 2012 and his vision has permeated company’s workforce. In the last five years, not a single person has left the company.

His goal is to bring more than 3,000 manufacturing jobs to Utah to meet the high demand for these semi-trucks.

For the trucking industry, this new concept is a huge disrupter. Milton foresees semi-autonomous and autonomous trucks where one driver might oversee a fleet of semis.

“Things are changing across the board from the drivers to how freight is booked and tracked,” he says. “While some drivers’ jobs might be eliminated, jobs created in other areas will create a net positive for trucking employment.”

With more than 1,000 horsepower and 2,000 foot-pounds of torque, the Nikola trucks are not only designed for power, but for safety.

High-definition cameras combine with radar and sonar software to provide drivers a 360-degree view, eliminating blind spots. Regenerative braking stops the trucks hundreds of times faster than traditional braking systems.

Milton promises his Nikola semi-trucks will bring higher-paying jobs and manufacturing opportunities to the state—and cleaner air. “We’re all about leaving this place better than we found it.”
When you think of outdoor gear, you probably think of big adventure products like kayaks, backpacks, tents or skis. But a small device, less than three inches long, is changing how outdoor enthusiasts carry and pack that gear.

The Tribe One PackTach is a unique gadget that works with a standard carabiner to attach to any type of fabric without ripping or tearing. The PackTach creates friction with the fabric to hold the carabiner in place. Used in combination with the PackNet, the products are the perfect solution for carrying gear on the outside of a backpack.

The PackTach and PackNet are those types of products that people slap their foreheads and say, “Why didn’t I think of that?” Designed and created by three brothers (Eric, Jeremy and Bill Spencer), the products were made out of necessity when bungee cords weren’t doing the job.

While preparing for a camping trip in Southern Utah, they created a Frankenstein version of the PackNet and later designed the PackTach device to make it functional. During the trip, people kept asking where they got the products—and the lightbulb went off.

“We thought this might be a thing,” Jeremy says. “In 2011, we took the products to a farmer’s market in Ogden and set up a tent with no idea what we were doing. We just knew we had a knack for tinkering with things and tackling and solving different problems.”

Working from a shed in Jeremy’s backyard, the Spencer brothers created Tribe One Outdoors, a company that designs products using these core principles: keep it simple, keep moving, capture accidents and ask intentionally stupid questions.

Initially, the backpacking community didn’t embrace the PackTach or PackNet. They wanted to keep things light and didn’t want more to carry. They soon realized the devices helped them carry want they wanted in a more secure way. Its biggest users are hunters who travel with lots of gear.

Tribe One Outdoors currently offers six products, with Jungle Cord being its best seller. After a bad experience in the patent process, the brothers didn’t seek a patent for Jungle Cord, deciding instead to market the cord hard and fast by flooding the market to create name recognition in the outdoor community.

Surprisingly, the company’s biggest customer is a distributor in Japan. “Outdoor activities in Japan, Thailand and Singapore have really skyrocketed,” Jeremy says “They like simple products that are practical.”

The Spencer brothers consider themselves “accidental geniuses” and have a philosophy that people in the outdoors strive for connection and simplicity and are drawn to their products for those reasons.

Even now, Jeremy says the business is often cash hungry. “It’s been a struggle. It peaks and valleys ever year. It seems like we’re always teetering on the razor’s edge of either blowing up or failing miserably.”

But the brothers keep tinkering around in their fort/shed/workshop, creating simple products to make being outdoors a little easier. “As a human race, we’re all part of the same tribe. In the outdoors, a person’s true nature will rise to the surface.”
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It’s considered the deadliest mental illness with the highest death rate of all psychiatric issues. It’s estimated that 20 million women and 10 million men in the United States battle this disease at some point in their life—and the founder of Avalon Hills in Logan was one of them.

Benita Quakenbush struggled with an eating disorder at a time when eating disorders were not understood. As a young woman she finally found a treatment utilizing components from alcohol or drug abuse programs that put her on the road to recovery. She realized this aspect of treatment was missing in the eating disorder world.

“We began Avalon Hills in 2003 in Logan,” Quakenbush says, “and we were told it would not be successful because people with eating disorders didn’t recover. But I knew if I could recover, other people could, too.”

Instead of interrupting the symptoms of an eating disorder, the staff at Avalon Hills treats every angle of care, creating a dedicated team for each patient to give them individualized treatment.

This multi-dimensional patient team includes a primary therapist, a dietician, family and group therapists, recovery coaches and a full-time medical staff to maintain each client’s safety.

Quakenbush describes this care as “psychodynamic” and believes it’s the reason Avalon Hills is helping their patients learn new behaviors that allow them to become the people they were meant to be. Treatment at the facility also addresses the high rates of anxiety, depression and suicide that so often accompany eating disorders.

“We are making a trail that people with mental health disorders can follow to move into wellbeing,” she says. “I have a very low threshold for failure.”

Neuroscience is an integral part of the Avalon Hills program. World-renowned experts in the area of brain science and biofeedback consult with the staff to create treatment programs. Brain mapping is done on each patient three times: at admission, during treatment and while in recovery to help patients understand how their efforts can change the physiological activity in the brain and encourage greater healing. “Many of our patients are not connected to their body’s sensations. We use things like yoga and martial arts so they get back in touch with their bodies in a healthy way.”

Since Avalon Hills opened, it has helped more than 700 patients through this integrated and innovative approach to recovery. Quakenbush has met with thousands of desperate parents and family members who were watching their loved ones literally waste away. She says her groundbreaking treatment program treats to outcome, not to income, and helps patients escape the revolving door of treatment to live full and happy lives.

“Families are overwhelmed. Eating disorders hijack a family, creating high stress, frustration and a feeling of helplessness. It’s a complex and deadly disorder. But we fight for your daughter every single day.”
Every business has its share of ups and downs, but S&S Worldwide has ups and downs, barrel rolls, steep drops and lots of G-force. As the world leader in family thrill-ride design and construction, S&S has built hundreds of rides for amusement parks in 30 countries.

Based in Logan, the company’s cutting-edge development has created some of the most heart-stopping trends in thrill rides. Stan Checketts started the company in the early ’90s and introduced the world to the innovative Space Shot tower, a 4-G vertical launch ride that shoots riders straight up then drops them at a negative 1-G descent. Riders and parks were hooked.

S&S also developed the Frog Hopper children’s ride and the first air-launched coaster that takes riders to speeds up to 100 miles per hour within seconds.

Tim Timco joined S&S in 2012, became president of the company in 2015 and was named CEO in 2016. During the last three years, S&S has seen a boom in business as amusement parks clamor to have the latest products from the visionary company.

S&S coasters have a small footprint so even the smallest parks can offer exciting thrill rides. The LSM triple launch coaster maximizes its space utilizing seven elements that include a 125-foot drop at more than 60 miles per hour, a twisting climb and a barrel roll. The popular 4th Dimension coasters take riders through a 20-story network of tracks, on 360-degree rotating seats, with speeds up to 80 miles per hour.

“We have 17 projects and 21 rides opening in 2017,” Timco says. “We’re the largest manufacturer of amusement rides in the United States. You’re only as good as the people you surround yourself with. All of our folks are terrific in what they do. They’re the backbone of the company.”

S&S currently has just over 100 employees. Because its coasters have been in such high demand, the company recently broke ground on a 100,000-square-foot building and plans to move into the new facility in early 2018. Everything except the track and structure is done in-house, from design and engineering, to the manufacturing of vehicles, controls and mechanical aspects of each ride. S&S has projects to take them through 2019, and later this year the company will roll out its first junior coaster to hook a new generation of thrill-ride fans.

Working with G-force rides requires several levels of oversight and safety standards. Some coasters require up to five levels of restraints, depending on the number of inversions a rider experiences.

“Safety is paramount in everything we do,” Timco says. “Even beyond [required standards], we take extra steps to make it as safe as possible. We have the best safety record in the business.”

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