



PROFILES: TIM TRABON

Dive In

His success comes from persistence and the freedom of a life without plans

STORY BY BRIAN D. SPANO | PHOTO COURTESY OF TIM TRABON

FAST FACTS

- ▶ Tim Trabon
- ▶ Beyond his work at Trabon Group, Tim has put a lot of effort into The Fallin' T Ranch, Land and Cattle Company in northeastern Missouri, planting native grasses and adopting sustainable grazing practices.

Upon entering Tim Trabon's office, you are immediately engrossed by four walls that tell his life story. Photos, artwork, framed newspaper clippings, pieces of his past work surround each visitor, awaiting to pour forth a story about a man who, though modest when he speaks of his accomplishments, has lived a life that most might only dream of.

Trabon is CEO of Trabon Group, a Kansas City-based company that offers marketing services and IT consulting to clients including restaurants, manufacturing, human resources,

him on weekends and evenings. He got ill when I entered high school and died when I was a sophomore. The work wasn't anything that interested me at that time in my life. I wanted to be a writer, and I wanted to have more adventure in my life."

Most of the work entailed business cards, statements and sales flyers for small businesses. Trabon admitted he had no business knowledge and very limited skills when it came to producing print material.

"I really adored my father," he says. "He was really kind of my hero, and I felt an obligation to carry on with what I believed his wishes were, which was to continue to build this company."

But what lay ahead in his immediate future wasn't the printing business. It was something far more alluring. Trabon imagined himself on

he in turn would reproduce with both the artist's and subject's signature on them. Cousteau would be the first.

"He was the personification of everything my life wasn't," Trabon says of Cousteau. "It was travel. It was adventure, excitement. That's why I chose him. It was what I wanted my life to be."

Through a mutual friend, Trabon was introduced to, of all people, singer John Denver, who was on the Cousteau Society's board of directors. Denver personally set up a meeting for Trabon with Cousteau's manager, Norman Solomon, to pitch his idea.

With no money and an oversized suit, Trabon flew to New York and was greeted with a positive response. He was promised a meeting with Cousteau himself; however, months went by without hearing a word. Finally, Trabon got the call he didn't want. Cousteau didn't like the living legends portrait idea.

"I remember being crushed," Trabon says. "I reflected on it for maybe a few hours and thought, 'You know, I'm just not going to give up. There's got to be a way.'"

After making numerous trips to New York to meet with representatives for Cousteau, meetings that ended in failure, Trabon went back to the Big Apple for what he called a legitimate reason. English had named him art director on one of his paintings that received an award from the New York Society of Illustrators.

With award in hand, Trabon marched back to Cousteau's office and offered his services at no cost. He was told to meet with Cousteau's

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retail, construction and health care. It was literally built from the ground up after it began in his parents' basement. His father believed it important to know a trade and, in the absence of an education, that people be able to provide for themselves.

"He bought a printing press and put it in our basement," Trabon says. "I was enlisted to help

the deck of the Calypso, Jacques Cousteau's famous sea exploration ship. So, he made it his personal mission to find a way to work with Cousteau.

It began with a simple idea.

Trabon befriended a well-known local artist, Mark English, and approached him about painting portraits of living legends that

son Jean-Michel who was on the lecture circuit and who, it just so happened, was coming to Kansas City to speak.

Trabon arrived at the lecture three hours early to meet Jean-Michel. Afterwards, he drove him back to his hotel to share his idea.

"I remember driving away thinking, 'What an idiot I've been,'" Trabon says. "I've pursued this about as far as I can, and there just isn't any way for me to succeed at this. I'll never hear from them again. After maybe a month, I got a call. He said, 'We're having this event called Harbor Fest. All the tall ships from all over the world sail into Chesapeake Bay, and we need a booklet on the Calypso produced. Would you be able to produce that in time? Our normal printer can't do it in time.'"

The opportunity of a lifetime had come for Trabon.

When all of the materials arrived for printing, his press wasn't big enough, so, without asking anyone, Trabon turned it into a poster. He flew it to Norfolk, Va., was invited aboard the Calypso and finally got to meet Jacques Cousteau.

From that moment on, Trabon's life and business acumen changed forever. Cousteau asked him to be the financial director of his Amazon expedition. It was the biggest expedition he'd ever mounted, a series of six films with a \$6 million budget.

"When he asked me to be financial director of the Amazon project, he took me to the cabin of his ship, and on the wall was a map of the Amazon. He said, 'I'm going to send you places few people have ever been,'" Trabon says. "I thought, I have to do this. I can always get back into the printing business. The next thing you know, I'm flying to Brazil, I'm trading money on the black market. I'm renting airplanes, burros, buying food. I lived with Indian tribes. I kept a receipt on everything and made a chart of accounts, turned in a financial record after five-and-a-half months. Everything I ever wanted, I was able to experience in this one adventure."

It was while in the Amazon that Trabon began to first understand how accounting worked. When he came back home, he

recognized he was blessed with the opportunity to work for himself. He applied the principles he learned in accounting to his own business, and that was when he began to turn it around.

Now, Trabon has been able to give back by providing free printing to approximately 85 percent of the charities in the community, but perhaps nothing has been more important than the life-changing phone call he made one night while watching a news show about a family in Sarajevo devastated by a mortar attack.

The mother and father were instantly killed during the first bomb. When the second and third came in, the older sister threw herself over her little brother to save his life. She was riddled with shrapnel. The boy was rescued and brought to the United States; however, the girl, Delila, was separated from her only surviving family member.

Trabon saw this story and wanted to do more than just a monetary donation. A chain of phone calls through a friend, a doctor who

appeared in the story, the news producer and a senator from North Dakota, started the wheels turning to bring Delila to the United States. Trabon, who is married and has three sons, decided to take in another family member.

"She was 17, and we had three little boys," Trabon says. "She came to live with us. My wife and I consider her our daughter, and she calls my wife every day. That's how a phone call can change your life."

Trabon's experiences throughout life have given him a unique perspective on it.

"I didn't come up with this way of thinking, but I believe you can really make your own life by not believing there's a regimented path you must follow," he says. "You kind of, in a way, throw the stepping stones out in front of you and cast them in whatever direction you are interested in pursuing. It sounds like a trite saying, but so many times in my life I thought things were going to be disastrous, but I went back and thought that was the best thing that ever happened to me." **KCB**

FAILURE IS THE FOUNDATION ▶

Tim Trabon never felt that he has been successful. "But today, I feel like I'm succeeding," he says.

He based that thought on one particular mentor whose advice he would seek whenever he found himself in a dilemma.

"His answers always frustrated me," Trabon says. "He would say, 'I know you'll always do the right thing.' I didn't always want to do the right thing, but I felt an obligation to live up to what he thought of me."

Trabon Group has survived and succeeded in part because of its lack of employee turnover. Trabon credits their talent.

"I've had some ideas, but it's there tactical implementation of some of my ideas that have really lifted me up on their shoulders."

Trabon's growth and success in business can be credited to some very basic principles: not being afraid to fail, never giving up on a dream, and making things easier and faster for your audience.

"You have to try to avoid it at all costs, but if you aren't failing, you aren't doing anything. Perseverance. There were so many times during the Cousteau story that I was defeated. Pride kept me going because I told so many people I was going to do this. I couldn't face those people having stated I was going to do something and then not do it. I had to at least try to the point that I couldn't try anymore. And finally, all the decisions I made were focused on how can I provide things faster and easier. There's an acceleration of activity in our lives. I felt like rather than struggle against it, I needed to embrace it."

