

Ask Allison Aldrich '91 about what it was like when her husband began his new business venture, and she's likely to tell you an anecdote that pretty much sums up their whirlwind lives so far. Back in the spring of 1995 Steven Aldrich was getting ready to graduate and marry Allison. She was excited about their planned honeymoon in Italy, but then Steven bought trip insurance, which left her wondering that maybe something was wrong. Weren't they going to get married?

Allison needn't have worried. Steven must have had a hunch that their honeymoon plans might be interrupted by one small item, namely millions of venture capital dollars. Sure enough, in the middle of everything else, he got word that the funding had come through to bankroll his idea for an insurance distribution service on the Internet, and he needed to start putting the company together as soon as possible. But there was no way he wasn't marrying Allison, although they did have to use the trip insurance money to fund an abbreviated honeymoon at a spa in New Hampshire.

From that frantic beginning the 29-year-old Steven has revolutionized the insurance industry with his online company, Interactive Insurance Services, now a part of software giant Intuit Inc., maker of Quicken, TurboTax and other personal finance software.

Interactive Insurance Services is a Web-based distribution service that currently brings more than 50 major insurance carriers together with Internet customers who are looking for the best deals in insurance products. The site has posted impressive statistics, with more than 500,000 visits each month by potential customers who generally are ample spenders on insurance.

Steven's interest in finance began here at Carolina where he was a Morehead Scholar working toward a physics degree. He took advantage of the breadth and depth of the liberal arts program at UNC by complimenting his science course work with a large helping of music, literature and history, along with classes in economics and marketing.

No doubt this pleased his father, Howard Aldrich, a Kenan professor in the UNC Department of Sociology and chair of the curriculum in management and society, whose own interests have focused on industrial relations and organizational behavior.

Intrigued with the world of finance, Steven joined the investment banking firm of Alex. Brown and Sons after graduation. And he took the knowledge he gained there with him to Stanford in 1993, where he developed a business plan for a new insurance carrier with a distributional twist: It would market insurance exclusively through the Internet and over the telephone.

His vision for the insurance industry was received warmly at Stanford. Says George Parker, who was Steven's advisor, "His is ambition in the best sense of the word, that is he wants to make a difference, to accomplish something important, and to build something innovative and new rather than simply accept what is. He added luster to our student body and has certainly distinguished himself since."

Steven realized the insurance business didn't need another carrier, but he knew that his plan for online distribution was the real breakthrough. He has a clear vision of what the Internet can do. "It's a very powerful communications tool," he says, "but it doesn't replace business strategy or good consumer research. You have to have a good

product idea and a good team." He reworked his plan and in the process landed the backing of the Zurich Center insurance company and Morgan Stanley Venture Partners.

One of the first challenges he faced was convincing the industry that the Internet needed to be part of its business plans for the future. Then there was the issue of convincing doubtful insurance executives that his small startup could deliver customers. Becoming part of the Intuit family quickly solved that problem. When asked about their potential customer base, Steven would ask, "How would 10 million customers do?" Usually the reply was "Very well, thank you."

For the future, Steven sees the current benefits of choice and convenience being applied to other insurance venues such as homeowners and small business insurance. And he shows his understanding of how consumers think when explaining that his business strategy is to combine the Internet's power as a search tool with the all-important human touch when people are ready to purchase an insurance product.

Steven Aldrich is convinced that if all a student does is complete the requirements for his or her degree, they miss out on an unbelievable array of opportunities that can be important in career plans, whatever they may be. "Just one particular fact that you learned in an anthropology class may help you respond to a situation better," he says. And he credits his time on the UNC fencing team with showing him the importance of individual and team excellence in creating a winning combination.

In one MBA class at Stanford the students were all asked what was going to differentiate them from one another in the business world? Again he pointed to his undergraduate days at Carolina. "To be able to draw from a diverse set of interests and to be able to have things that recharge your batteries when other people get stuck and no longer can find the idea or the passion," he says. "To be able to move beyond a certain level."

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