

Rural ‘Change-maker’

Nebraska native
Brent Comstock offers
encouragement to rural
youth and communities.

by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor

When one thinks of a rural community with few — if any — stoplights, no Starbucks and a small population, the words “opportunity” and “possibilities” may not be the first to come to mind.

Auburn, Neb., native Brent Comstock wants to prove otherwise.

Comstock, who started a computer repair business in his hometown of 3,500 people at the age of 12, is now a 21-year-old college student whose business has morphed into providing digital and web services to rural campaigns, causes and companies. He has employees and clients across the country.

In addition to seeing his company BCom Solutions thrive, Comstock is on a mission to encourage others — especially youth — to find the possibilities in their rural communities. Here’s the advice he suggests to see rural possibilities with fresh eyes.

Don’t take no for an answer

“No” is a word Comstock heard often growing up.

“As a teen I heard, ‘No, you can’t be successful or smart or a multimillionaire in a small town,’” he admits. He suspects other rural youth often experience that stereotype, as well.

However, Comstock suggests hearing the word “no” should not deter anyone from pursuing their ideas. In his own case, he adapted the mind-set of aiming to be a “problem-solver.” Specifically, he recognized a decade ago that rural communities lacked technology and technology support. Thus, he pursued helping individuals with their home computers — and eventually businesses,



PHOTO COURTESY BRENT COMSTOCK

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organizations and rural politicians came on board as clients seeking to enhance their digital presence and message.

To others looking at pursuing new ideas or a potential business start-up within their rural community, he advises looking for problems and brainstorming solutions. In that process he underscores a few key components, including:

- Listen to what people may say, but also study their actions and behaviors. Comstock says to look for “what excites people” and then strive to amplify that.
- Build relationships. Have “coffee shop” sessions between youth and the senior generation, he suggests. “Meet with community members and don’t have an agenda. See what you learn. It’s about relationships first, and then working together.”
- Change your vernacular. “Instead of saying ‘but’ use ‘and,’” he suggests. For example, consider identifying “We have this problem, but ...” vs. “We have this problem, and ...” By using “and” instead of “but,” Comstock says, “You’ll be amazed at how the viewpoint changes from a negative to a positive connotation. ... When you use ‘and’ you become a problem-solver.”

Talent, passion, people

In addition to those initial steps toward identifying opportunities, Comstock believes there are three factors integral to an individual’s success — no matter their

location. These include:

1. Talent. Comstock points out that today everything is online. Thus, “It’s easy to know things,” he says. However, he suggests knowing things is not as critical as having a true talent or skill.

“You have to have a talent — be the best at something,” he says.

He also advises, “You have to hone in on that talent in rural communities.

It’s easy to sign up for 30 things, but identify your talent and focus on developing it instead of being spread thin.” He suggests pondering the question: How is being spread thin impacting my talent?

2. Passion. Hand-in-hand with talent, Comstock says, “You have to love what you are doing. ... If you have the talent and passion, I guarantee you can find opportunity.”
3. People. This one may sound obvious, but Comstock says the caveat is that it’s less about you and more about others. “This is about the people we surround ourselves with, people who are smarter than you,” he explains. “You have to find mentors, people who will challenge you, or you will fall back. The people you surround yourself with are so important.”

He surmises, “People, passion and talent — if you are missing one of those three things, it’s difficult to move ahead.”

An additional piece of advice that Comstock shares is this: “We all want to



CONTINUED ON PAGE 118

be successful, we just have different ways of defining success. One of my mentors told me it’s so important to live your own life.” Comstock likes to use the quote: “It is better to fail at your own life than succeed at someone else’s.”

Prioritize

Lastly, Comstock emphasizes that it is important for every individual to know their priorities. In today’s tech-laden world, Comstock notes, “It is so easy to get distracted. We consume millions of pieces of data from our phone, radio, newspapers, Facebook. . . . Especially for students coming out of high school, there are a lot of messages coming at you.”

Comstock says it’s important to have a system to identify what’s valid and what’s important to you and what’s not.

As one strategy to help prioritize, he suggests picking a set number of people — three to five — who will provide you with advice and information to help you make difficult decisions. “Choose people who you know and trust for your best interest.”

Additionally, Comstock says, weekly it’s important to purge.

“The garbage truck comes once a week,” Comstock explains. “It’s easy for each of us to get caught up in what I consider trash — being distracted by problems or dwelling on something that upsets us. So once a week, I suggest you throw it away; get rid of it. Don’t pout or complain. Throw it out and start anew.”

Comstock likes to apply this same principle to other aspects of life as well. He explains, “It’s easy to beat an idea to the ground. So if you have ideas you don’t use within a year, it’s time to toss it. That goes for stuff, relationships and roles on boards, too. If you don’t use it or get anything from it, leave it or throw it out.”

Lastly, Comstock encourages individuals from rural communities to embrace their uniqueness — and share their stories with others. “Telling your story is important for people to know what occurs in small towns,” he says.

Likewise, Comstock says there’s often a belief — especially with regard to youth — that “if we achieve success in rural communities, you then need to go somewhere bigger or better.”

He concludes, “If you think population is the solution to your problems, that’s false.”



Editor’s Note: *Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and cattleguard from Whitewood, S.D.*

Additional insight from a rural entrepreneur

Nebraska entrepreneur Brent Comstock hopes to see other youth in rural communities survive and thrive by pursuing their own innovative ideas just as he has. He offers several nuggets of advice.

- ▶ Comstock says identifying rural opportunities should not be hindered by focusing on the population base; rather, he emphasizes, it’s essential to identify the customer base.
- ▶ Likewise, he has found it virtually impossible to be a member of a rural community while also trying to be a change-maker in a rural community. He says, “It’s impossible to do both. You have to do one or the other.”
- ▶ Looking ahead, Comstock suggests rural business owners must be willing to adapt and change. He has done this with his company. Realizing that computer repair is no longer integral to his business, he stopped offering that service a year ago. Comstock suggests having the ability to listen and change are essential to long-term business success.
- ▶ Comstock notes that failure is part of any process. However, there can be positives from that experience, he notes. “When you fail, you’ll weed out those who are not committed, but you’ll find those who are passionate.”
- ▶ Comstock is a proponent of giving to communities. Rather than “give back” he suggests, just “give.” He says one way to do that while also engaging your community is to share your talent or resources by teaching others a skill.
- ▶ A tip for older generations looking to involve the younger generation (also known as millennials), Comstock says it is important to recognize that most youth are action-oriented. They want to “do now and learn later,” he explains. Therefore, asking them to “sit on a board” is not exciting to them. Instead, Comstock suggests, “Change the term or project and give responsibility to the younger generation by focusing on the action and asking if they will lead an event or cause.”
- ▶ Finally, Comstock says of utmost importance is having a mind-set toward “continual improvement.”