

Backyard Brains strengthens sales muscle

Based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Backyard Brains designs and manufactures advanced, yet affordable neuroscience research equipment for K-12 students. The company has grown to more than \$1.7 million in annual sales since its launch in 2009, and wanting to scale further, co-founder Greg Gage entered the Edward Lowe Foundation's System for Integrated Growth (SIG) in spring 2019. Among specific objectives, Gage sought to make sales and marketing activities more efficient.

“We’re not that skilled in marketing, and we were running out of ideas on how to grow,” said Gage, explaining that his staff is comprised of engineers and scientists. In response, Kelly Hill, a SIG specialist in sales and marketing, reviewed Backyard Brains’ current sales practices and identified areas for improvement. Among her deliverables:

- *Sales coaching.* Backyard Brains has one full-time salesperson, and Hill addressed how to re-frame sales messaging and scripts, shifting the emphasis from product-pushing to quickly communicating a value proposition for customers. She also helped the salesperson become more comfortable with cold-calling.
- *Creating a more detailed sales forecast.* This included breaking down annual sales goals into smaller, more tactical objectives, along with target market accounts, product lines and conversion points. “Having specific objectives helps establish accountability — and makes it easier to see if you’re on target or need to change your approach,” Hill explained.
- *Pursue new business targets.* Instead of cold-calling individual teachers, Backyard Brain’s salesperson is now approaching decision-makers within large school districts and STEM programs.
- *Reach out to existing customers.* To get more repeat business, Gage has hired a new employee who will engage with existing customers, make them aware of new products and ask for referrals to potential new clients.

“The SIG program was completely different than other types of assistance our company has had — and it was a real turning point for me as a business owner,” Gage said. “The SIG team was able to identify not only



Backyard Brains co-founder Greg Gage describes the electrical impulses of the motor pathway to students at a science festival in Belgrade, Serbia.

— Photo courtesy of Festival Nauke Beograd

SIG case study: Backyard Brains

solutions, but what the real problem was. They opened my eyes to why I've felt so overwhelmed the past two years.”

Attending a “Next Steps” retreat with other second-stage CEOs (a sequel to the SIG engagement), was also a huge help, Gage adds. “During the retreat, we were exposed to a process for analyzing our companies’ internal resources, and I realized that we shouldn’t be a manufacturing company,” he explains. “Instead of soldering circuit boards, we should focus efforts where real value is for customers — being a next-generation thinker for education.”

Another takeaway from the retreat, Gage is looking to bring on an operations officer. “I’ve gotten this far on my own, but now realize I need to start building a senior team. Being the only decision maker is not only frustrating but lonely.”

“At the retreat, I found peers who knew exactly where I was coming from, and they were all in the same spot,” he adds. “It was like having a big corporate shrink to discuss your growth problems with.”



The System for Integrated Growth (SIG) gives second-stage CEOs access to a SWAT team of business experts to help address issues impacting growth. Vetted by the Edward Lowe Foundation, SIG specialists work virtually to provide information and best practices that help CEOs strengthen company infrastructure, enter new markets and find new customers.

