

Switch hats when necessary

Cesar Bandera / BanDeMar Networks

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By Joel Berg | Two hats are proving better than one for Cesar Bandera.

An engineer by training, Bandera cultivated a talent for grant writing while working for a defense technology contractor in the 1990s.

Bandera taps both skills—engineering and grant writing—as president and chief executive officer of Newark-based BanDeMar Networks. The company, which has a West Coast office outside Los Angeles, seeks to turn new technologies into commercial products.

Bandera helped launch BanDeMar Networks in 2003. It is the second entrepreneurial venture he has pursued since leaving AT&T Labs in 2001. The first, a company called Sorcerer, folded in the wake of the dot.com crash.

In both cases, researchers were looking for something to do after larger companies cut back on funding for their work, says Bandera.

BanDeMar evaluates technologies submitted by doctors, scientists and engineers. The company also comes up with ideas of its own.

One is the video processing used in the global microscope project at Liberty Science Center in Jersey City. The global microscope is an interactive globe that displays videos and close-up views of specific areas.

Another is a project to deliver just-in-time training over cell phones to emergency responders. While working on that project, Bandera saw the value of a good commercialization plan in solving technical issues.

Users had no trouble receiving multimedia messages, Bandera says. But not everyone could figure out how to send them. No technical solution seemed to work.

In studying distribution, however, Bandera found that some cell-phone users received on-site training on advanced features, such as multimedia. BanDeMar took the same approach. Problem solved.

“I had never seen that happen before,” Bandera says. “Things like delivery channels, marketing channels, are dimensions that the engineer, the strict engineer, never exploits to solve engineering problems. That is something that you can do if you are wearing both hats.”

At first, Bandera didn't think he would like writing grant proposals. But over time, the task began to appeal to him.

“It forces you to be a devil's advocate for starters,” he says. “If you're doing it correctly, you are writing a document that is intended for a very hostile audience. You have to justify everything. You have to acknowledge the competition and explain very clearly why your idea is better ... It's very humbling.”

These days, grant writing requires a rigorous look at a technology's commercial potential, he adds. “This is something that was not emphasized even before the dot.com craze, when there was a lot of money for research and development.”

