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Bringing Power to the People

In "Bright Lights, No City," Max Alexander describes the strange challenges of marketing a much-needed product—rechargeable batteries—in rural Ghana.

Article

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By MARC LEVINSON

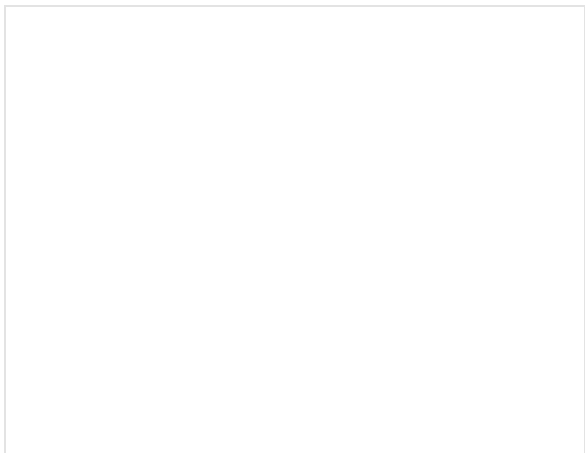


When it comes to economic growth, entrepreneurship is the fashion of the moment. Nowhere is that truer than among those who would aid the world's poorer countries. Bags of grain and bundles of cash are out; microfinance, deregulation and property rights are in. If only people can be inspired to start businesses, the thinking goes, they will hoist themselves out of poverty, create jobs for their neighbors and launch their countries on the path to prosperity.

But as Max Alexander shows us memorably, things aren't quite so simple. Entrepreneurship requires more than capital and a concept. It takes a large amount of patience, considerable flexibility, a fair degree of cross-cultural rapport (if the entrepreneurial zeal is imported) and a bit of crazy optimism—all the more so when peddling an innovative product that your cash-strapped target customers have no idea they need. In "Bright Lights, No City," Mr. Alexander combines a high-energy travelogue with an insightful exploration of what it takes to turn an idea into a profitable enterprise. The result is a wonderfully entertaining business book.

The author's brother, Whit Alexander, had lived in Africa as a student and aid worker. After making millions of dollars building the board-game company Cranium and selling it to Hasbro, he decided to return to Africa and demonstrate the possibilities of growth through entrepreneurship. He would start a firm that would help poor Africans but also make a profit. The product he settled on was a battery charge.

In Ghana, millions of villagers for whom electric service is a distant dream rely on Chinese-made batteries to power their flashlights and radios. At the equivalent of 25 U.S. cents a pair, replacing AA batteries several times a month consumes a large share of rural Ghanaians' incomes. Whit's inspiration was to offer rechargeable batteries by subscription, allowing customers paying a monthly fee to exchange dead batteries for fresh ones whenever they needed them. He launched



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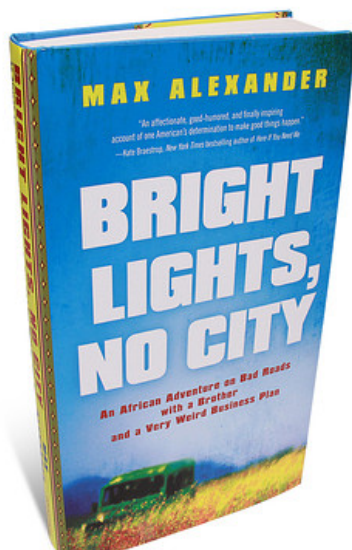


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Bright Lights, No City

By Max Alexander
(Hyperion, 378 pages, \$24.99)

and pick up dead ones for recharging each week. Then, often with the guidance of the village chief, it must select an agent to identify and serve customers for a commission of a few cents per battery per month. And then it must market its product. This usually means paying the gong-gong man a dollar or two to bang on a cowbell and summon villagers to an impromptu assembly at which Whit and the local agent tout their service. This call to assembly was in itself a challenge. The Alexanders encountered a "Zen-like concept of time and distance" that made it "difficult to do business in the conventional sense," Mr. Alexander writes. "Often the closest we could get to pinning down a gong-gong was for 'Friday' or 'Tuesday.' We considered ourselves lucky if we could at least specify morning or afternoon."

Inevitably, Whit's business plan runs into unexpected problems. Agents are unwilling to insist that neighbors who fail to pay up return their batteries: Burro needs to work on training. Some newly recharged batteries quickly run out of juice: Burro must test each recharged battery before sending it back into the field. Many users don't run through enough batteries to make a monthly subscription worth the price: Burro must change its pricing strategy, abandoning unlimited monthly use in favor of a small fee each time a customer exchanges a dead battery for a recharged one. Not all employees and agents are willing to adhere to Burro's rules: People must be fired.

Slowly, village by village, business builds. But profit remains elusive. A few thousand customers each spending a few cents per month don't bring in enough revenue to cover costs. And then Whit conceives a killer app. Flying to China, he comes back with an inexpensive device that offers enterprising villagers a way to make money by using Burro's product. I won't spoil the story except to say that, at least for now, it has a happy ending.

The trials and tribulations of an American building a battery business in places that don't appear on government maps will fascinate current or future entrepreneurs. Along the way, readers will get a vivid understanding of why it is so difficult for poor countries to become rich. On that subject, the author's acknowledgments also shed light. Mr. Alexander chose to give pseudonyms to almost all his characters. As he explains, "for a Ghanaian striving to better his life, a seemingly trivial affront to someone in power will not

his company, Burro, in 2008, promising more power for less money in a country where a few cents matter a great deal.

Max Alexander, formerly an editor at Variety and People, came along to help his brother launch the company. As a first-time visitor to Africa, Mr. Alexander is a careful observer of Ghanaian ways and practices, from shakedowns by the traffic police and the peculiarities of getting tires for the company car to the communal life in the courtyard of the building that serves as his home and Burro's office. Somehow he manages to maintain his enthusiasm for Ghana for page after page, even as he discovers the realities of doing business there.

Selling subscriptions to a rechargeable-battery scheme turns out to be a tall order. First, Burro must identify villages that have no electric lines and are close enough to headquarters, in the town of Koforidua, for a Burro employee to deliver fresh batteries

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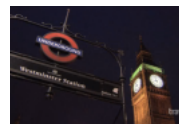
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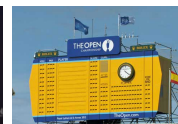
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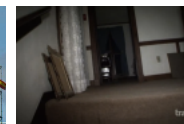
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land him in jail, but it could very well wreck his career." Even in a relatively stable and democratic country, it seems, entrepreneurship has its limits as a strategy for economic development.

Mr. Levinson's most recent book is "The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business in America."

A version of this article appeared July 17, 2012, on page A13 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Bringing Power To the People.

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