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Partners till the end Mutual benefits from mentoring

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By Mary Donahue

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There are many memorable steps to starting a business, few more arduous than finding a good partner. Anyone who has struggled with this knows it can be a long, slow and unsteady road.

The idea of forming a partnership with a company that is also a mentor is one that is just beginning to emerge in the Canadian economy, while in the United States the concept is starting to soar. One reason for this slow response to the idea of growth through partnering could be the size of the Canadian pie compared with the American cake. Canadians seem to feel that if they share and or help their competition they will lose their market.

To find a good mentoring program you need to contact someone influential in your field and ask them to review your business and plans. Be warned -- influential people with money and power are hard to find in Canada. They seem to go into hibernation, coming out only for the occasional social event, or to check their shadow, whichever comes first. Very few are willing to risk taking a chance on anything new, such as investing in a nascent business. This trend is starting to change, however, as large international companies start looking for entrepreneurs that can increase their bottom line.

Mark Duffey, the co-founder and president of funeral planning company Everest, understands the value of mentors and international partners. His collaboration with some of the largest companies in North America has helped him build a unique and potentially segment-stealing product. Everest (www.everestfuneral.com) is the first nationwide funeral package planning service. It is designed to meet the demands of ageing consumers and is the result of a unique collaboration of some



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of North America's most respected companies, including General Electric's Insource Ltd., EDS, and Federated Life Insurance Co. of Canada. These blue chip companies have come together with Mr. Duffey to revolutionize the \$15-billion funeral-planning market by allowing clients to plan their funeral anywhere in Canada. You can choose to be buried on your favourite hill in Vancouver or at your natty plot in an exclusive part of Toronto.

Ted Matthews, a professional mentor and a brand-development expert with Toronto-based Brand Coach, says Mr. Duffey is on the right track. He says businesses, including startups such as Everest, must differentiate or they will disappear. "While most new business owners dream of their company serving everyone, and therefore don't want to eliminate anyone, the first step in building a brand is selecting a very narrow, unique proposition, that will stand out from others in your field," Mr. Matthews says. "Being unique qualifies as new information and it is filed away in the prospect's mind as something they didn't know. And a place in the mind is what building a brand is about."

Being unique seems to come easily to Mr. Duffey, a handsome, intelligent and minimally modest man who is not afraid to discuss or open a discussion on the delicate issues of death and planning your own funeral.

No one has offered this type of funeral planning before. Everest allows even the most fervent type-A personality to take control and plan their own commemoration. To plan your funeral, you can call on the telephone, meet a funeral planner in person or use the Web. Everest does not sell. It acts as your broker and go-between with funeral-home operators as you plan and fund your final hurrah. It is not affiliated with a specific funeral home so it is able to help you and your family meet your every whim.

The last time this many established firms agreed on one company, Henry Ford had a success on his hands. Maybe this indicates the time of the entrepreneur is now.

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