



# The Entrepreneurial Spirit: From Concept to Success

## Mark Brolaski: *Building the Business*

San Diego's well known research and development companies may be at the core of the region's successful biotechnology industry cluster, but without the companies who supply necessary products and services, they may not endure for long. San Diego's biotechnology industry, considered by many to be the best in the country, is composed of a chain of interdependent sectors, from firms that produce the basic laboratory necessities such as reagents and the instrumentation that occupy the researcher's bench to research and development companies mining new ideas and discoveries for innovative drugs and therapeutics. Just as many of San Diego's R&D companies, like Hybritech and Agouron, had their beginnings at UCSD and other local universities, so do many of San Diego's biotechnology service and manufacturing companies. In the case of MO BIO Laboratories, Inc., a Carlsbad company with a multi-million dollar menu of biotechnology research products and services, its origins and sustaining philosophy come from the passion of an innovative UCSD biology alumnus and his quest for balance and efficiency.

UCSD biology alumnus and president of MO BIO, Mark Brolaski, is a San Diego native. He was raised in La Jolla and grew up as a surfer, as he describes it, spending as much time as he could riding the waves off the San Diego coast. With his love of the ocean and an interest in biology, UCSD was the perfect school for Brolaski. On campus during the late 70's and early 80's, he was on the UCSD surf team and spent hours in the waters off of Black's Beach, occasionally surfing with UCSD biology professor Paul

Saltman, who was also an avid surfer. Brolaski was active on campus as well as in the waves. An Apache Indian who is also a self-described "Urban-Indian," he served as the president of the UCSD Native American Student Alliance for one year. He remembers that experience as one of the most rewarding, "I had the opportunity to give something back to the university instead of just going to get everything I could out of the university."

Brolaski graduated in 1982 with a bachelor's degree in mammalian physiology. He recalls that "when I got out of school, there were few biology-related laboratory jobs and lots of biology majors looking for jobs." This was before the birth of the biotechnology industry in the mid-1980's. After four years at UCSD, he found himself working as a state lifeguard. While assessing his options and considering application to medical school, his days on the beach led to a serendipitous event that turned Brolaski toward biotechnology. One day, a friend stopped by to see Brolaski at the beach. She mentioned that she was leaving San Diego to attend medical school and asked him if he would be interested in the lab position she held at the Scripps Research Institute. He immediately said "yes," applied for and was offered the position. He started working at Scripps for Jim Gauch, a Ph.D. in the molecular biology department.

Brolaski describes the spirit in the lab as entrepreneurial. "Jim and I were both thinking 'what can we do, what kind of company can we start?'" In the early 1980's, a number of new technologies enabling researchers to iso-



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1982, Muir College

late, manipulate and study DNA and RNA were driving the new field of molecular biology, and new discoveries were fueling the birth of the San Diego biotechnology industry.

In 1986, Brolaski and Gauch started a company called Bio 101, the first company to sell DNA and RNA isolation kits. According to Brolaski, "We did well in spite of ourselves. We didn't know much about what we were doing, none of us had any business background. But we had no competitors. We started in this little hole in the wall in Sorrento Valley. We advertised in some major science journals, *Nature* and *Science*, and the phone never stopped ringing." Bio 101 grew to be one of the largest service companies in San Diego and in 2000 was purchased by Quantum Biotechnologies.

In 1994, Brolaski left Bio 101 when his entrepreneurial and independent spirit became the

impetus for a new company, MO BIO (an abbreviation for molecular biology). With a need to be on his own, he started MO BIO in his garage. He describes its beginnings as “one step back from how we started Bio 101.” Brolaski and his wife and business partner, Liz, attended business classes in the evening, anticipating a need to understand the basics of business and finance. By day they negotiated with chemical companies who wouldn’t deliver to their business because it was located in a residential area. MO BIO provides DNA and RNA research-related products to biotechnology laboratories around the world similar to Bio 101, but Brolaski combined his understanding of molecular biology with his business experience and his Zen-like surfer philosophy to set up a different company culture that fuels independent thinking and innovative products and services.

Brolaski’s plan for MO BIO was to offer customers a large array of opportunities in both products and services. He explains, “Unlike our competitors, in addition to our products, we provide necessary services to biotech companies such as microbiology and sterility testing.” MO BIO developed a quality assurance process to certify plastics for use in molecular biology research. It was the only company in the world that could certify firms manufacturing plastic laboratory consumables. MO BIO’s two-pronged business approach was successful. Brolaski recalls that “if we had a slow month in service, the products were up and if products were slow, the service was up. So we always had a steady revenue stream.” Thus, his advice to people who want to start a company is to diversify as much as you can. “There are so many companies that start out with one idea, maybe one product that might get FDA approval. If you survive that whole process it’s great, but if you don’t, you’re done.”

MO BIO has grown into an international company with distribution of its products to univer-

sities, research labs, pharmaceutical companies, and medical device companies worldwide. The company specializes in environmental micro products, oils spills reagent kits, bio remediation, and forensics and is also active in building kits to determine the presence of pathogenic organisms. It has 20 employees and recently made its third move, into its own new building, since its beginnings in Brolaski’s garage.

At the core of his business philosophy are lessons Brolaski learned from surfing. Before his Bio 101 days he was a professional surfer, traveling all over the world. As he describes it, “I’ve surfed waves as big as they can come in and it taught me not to be afraid of taking that first step and doing something that’s scary or difficult. There’s nothing scarier than a 30-foot wave coming at you and turning around and starting to paddle for it, taking off on it and riding it. A lot of times I tell people this company is like that, like riding a big wave. I’m just hanging on sometimes, not certain of where we’re going because things happen so fast in business that you’re not always sticking to some business plan. Sometimes opportunities fall right into your lap and you’ve got to decide what you’re going to do about it right then and there; you have to respond to it. It’s a lot like surfing and you can’t be afraid to do it.”

Brolaski maintains a modest office, close to the lab action, and has an open door policy. Wearing an Hawaiian print shirt and shorts and surrounded by surf memorabilia and pictures of his 10-year-old daughter, he smiles and comments that, “Things have been going great! It’s just really super fun what we do. I have plenty of good people here to bounce ideas off of – it’s not just me figuring this stuff out all by myself. With the kind of environment we have at MO BIO, we can act fast on new technologies and new ideas to turn them into products and sell them pretty rapidly. One of the best things about Liz and me owning the company is that we get

to do what every small company wants to do: when you see an opportunity and if it seems like it’s a good idea, you can act on it immediately.”

According to Brolaski, there are quite a few scientists and business people who surf. He is a member of the Successful Surfers Networking Group, whose members are from every walk of life. Says Brolaski, they “watch the waves and chat about business. The whole mantra of this group is that you’re there to help other people, you’re not there to seek help from other people. With that in mind, if you can offer anybody any advice, that’s really the goal. It’s not a networking group in the sense that I’m trying to sell more widgets to this guy because he might be able to use them. It’s really a matter of how can I help someone else because someday, somehow that will come back to me.”

His love of surfing and science has shaped Brolaski’s unique business philosophy, which drives the development of many of the products and services offered by MO BIO. Even the company’s tagline, “Saving you time for life” reflects his philosophy about innovation. He says, “Some of my most creative ideas come when I’m surfing. I believe you need that time in your day when free ideas come into your head. Who knows where they come from? You need to relax your brain to the point where new ideas don’t get pushed away because you can’t think about them. I hope our company makes it so people’s work is as efficient as possible so they can get on with their lives and do the things that they enjoy.”

For more information about MO BIO, visit: <http://www.mobio.com>.

