

When Jim Black couldn't get a small loan from the government to launch his business, he got creative.

The Vietnam vet enrolled in a junior college so he could get his hands on cash through the GI Bill. He used it to get his business, a directory of office buildings, off the ground.

He called the directory Black's Guide. And it was the real estate broker's bible for decades.

Now, 27 years and several directories later, 59-year-old Black again is going strong in the commercial real estate business. He's sold Black's Guide, paid back the \$7,000 in GI Bill money at the government's -- ahem -- request, and recently jumped from publishing four-inch thick bulky books to expanding CoStar Group's electronic media sales and products.

On the surface, his career move seems as plausible as Alexander Graham Bell going to work for Google.

But to Black, the message hasn't changed even if the messenger has.

"When I came to CoStar and saw how Andy [Florence] set up his business, I'm going, 'This is exactly how I had my business,'" says Black in a strong New Jersey accent. "It's the same formula. The broker is the center and the most important piece here. If you service his needs, you're serving the tenant's needs and you're serving the developer's needs because both sides work with the broker."

Finding his place

Black's chatty nature belies the intensity in his eyes and behind his message.

His philosophy of effective marketing and his passion for research are sprinkled between jokes about his peach Ford Capri that he drove around collecting information for Black's Guide back in the day.

Black held a number of short-lived jobs before he arrived at his idea for a book of building stats.

He worked for Cushman & Wakefield in 1970 representing tenants. In just two years, he made some commission, but decided he didn't really have the patience for interminable big lease deals.

Retail leasing was more fun for Black. He tried it for a while in a New Hampshire mall, where he met with little rejection and a faster pace.

Once he got the mall leased he went to yet another two-year gig, this time as a developer representative at the Charles Evans Co. which didn't hold his interest for long.

Black's varied real estate careers taught him one thing: brokers and developers need information to grow. He enjoyed organizing the office building brochures he collected, putting the pictures together with maps. Black thought maybe he could get some advertisers and produce a directory. But it wasn't until a friend's father asked him one day, "What are you waiting for?" that Black found all the encouragement he needed.

"It's easy, if you have nothing," Black says, "to bet everything."

He started Black's Guide in New Jersey before expanding north to Westchester and south to Philadelphia. With three guides and about six employees, revenue would double each year for the first couple of years. Eventually, versions of the books hit other markets, including D.C., Denver and Houston.

HOME OF THE DAY

The publication was a powerhouse in almost every market it entered, says Mark Sisselman, who started the Denver Black's Guide in 1982. He now is president of the National Center for Real Estate Research in Colorado. Sisselman and Black severed ties years ago when Black sold the publication to McGraw-Hill, but Sisselman says Black was bright, worked hard and was opportunistic.

In 1980 the company took a stab at publishing its findings on a computer database which brokers could call in to. But back then it was unusual for brokers to have computers on their desks, and only about three or four signed on.

"Unfortunately the real estate brokerage community was not adept with computers," Sisselman says. "It was not successful, but he was foresighted enough to understand" the potential.

A new idea

Like a good cocktail, Black experimented with adding new ingredients to his mix. A dab of research and a splash of marketing helped round out the recipe for the directories. Initially he marketed Black's Guide to tenants, but realized that the people who really need the directory are the brokers, commercial real estate directors and developers.

His plan was to offer free books but generate revenue from advertising. He started with a 20,000 circulation and he kept narrowing the focus until it was down to 7,000 in circulation. The revenue and research got better although the circulation shrunk, and his niche and reputation were cemented.

McGraw-Hill bought the directories in 1985, Black made a chunk of change in the process and started publishing directories focused on the outdoor sports he fancied in 1990. Black's Wing & Clay and Black's Fly Fishing were predecessors to a lecture series he started on how to market hunting preserves.

It sounds like a big shift from the bricks-and-mortar world he grew up in. But whether it was a 200,000-square-foot office building or a 15-bed hunting preserve, the message stayed the same. The transfer of business lessons from one industry to another was "spectacularly easy," Black says.

Stepping into technology

Eventually, though, Black's entrepreneurial wild side was muffled by exhaustion. He was tired of stressing about payroll and large printing bills. In 2003 he sold his outdoor sports directories and started the year with new goals: To bike across the country and to get a job.

Considering his resume, he never expected riding across the country would be an easier goal to meet.

"I put my resume together and I sent it out to all those Web sites and posted it," Black says, "and it was amazing how many responses I got: zero."

He set up meetings with people from CoStar, LoopNet and Black's Guide, which do slight variations of the same thing.

Even though the publication is named after him, Black's Guide people "looked at me like I was a relic," Black says, laughing.

LoopNet and CoStar didn't have anything right away, so Black went on his bike ride a little discouraged, but content to move forward. He rode 1,000 miles, from Sioux Falls to Niagara Falls, in two weeks before calling it quits.

When he got home, there was a message from Florence asking him to come to Bethesda to talk. Black joined CoStar Group in the fall and has divided his time between a hotel in Bethesda and his home in New Jersey.

Since late September, Black has been working on a new Web-based advertising program, which comes out Feb. 15.

"I'm transferring a lot of the same thinking from print to online because it really is the same," Black says. "I know what the market needs, I know what the brokers want, and I know what the developers want.

"It hasn't changed. You've just got new communications tools."