

INMATES TO ENTREPRENEURS



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AJ BARTO



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Inmates to Entrepreneurs

Inmates to Entrepreneurs' free video course "Starter U: How to Start, Run, and Grow a Business" is available online and on Edovo's tablets in correctional facilities across the U.S. The organization also provides online classes throughout the country.

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AJ Barto, a recent Inmates to Entrepreneurs course graduate, grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania. Diagnosed with diabetes at age four, he found his academic and athletic prospects derailed by a serious car accident in high school. Barto drifted into what he calls the “Wolf of Wall Street” side of the financial industry, where careers around him soon began to implode. Wanting out, he ended up homeless.

Barto needed insulin, so he wrote a bad check to Rite Aid. That earned him six months in jail. Over the next five years he would be in and out of prison on various charges.

Upon release in 2012, Barto moved to California where he found a sales job with an industrial contractor. California had legalized marijuana for recreational use in 2016, and an industry consultant had set up shop in the office next door. Barto joined the business and received an exhaustive education in everything from R&D to branding. In 2017 he broke away from the consultancy to launch his own: International Cannabis Group (ICG), based in Costa Mesa.

Barto built his business by cold calling. “I walked into a dispensary and said, ‘This is who I am and here is how I will boost your sales,’” he says. “I would show them the proper way to operate, keep the right amount of product on their shelves, and keep their costs down.” Barto asked for a percentage of increased revenues rather than a fee, reducing risk for potential clients.

He also advised dispensaries on compliance. “Marijuana is a very volatile market, and they are still ironing out the regulations,” says Barto. “You have to stay up-to-date with everything.”

Daily sales calls landed Barto about a dozen clients and referral payments for each new customer helped grow the business; however, he mostly relied on word of mouth. “It’s a tight community and people talk,” says Barto.

While growing ICG, Barto works as a sales representative for several cannabis manufacturers—deepening his knowledge and allowing him to match-make between his employers and his clients. For clients, the ability to source products directly, among other efficiencies introduced by Barto, increased ICG profits by roughly 18 percent.

Today ICG serves more than 120 dispensaries and Barto consults with upwards of 50 clients in other parts of the cannabis ecosystem. To handle the workload he has brought on four partners, who are compensated with a percentage of the business.

Although he used drugs in the past, Barto never liked marijuana. But as he observed the medical and psychological benefits of THC—including on an ailing family member—he became an evangelist as well as a businessperson. “Seeing what they were doing with things like PTSD and autism, I was like wow,” he says. “This really needs to be out there.”