

Startups Heat Up The Miami Scene

It's hard to take Miami seriously when, at the first moment of hearing someone mention it, neon lights, Scarface and Will Smith's 1998 hit single come to mind. With nightlife as vibrant as Miami's, it is not often known for the people who hit the office as much as they hit the clubs. However, these days, it's the Miami entrepreneurs that are heating up the scene faster than the rise and fall of this month's trendy South Beach nightclub.

Like Miami, though, these entrepreneurs are anything but typical. Their swanky co-working space, Pipeline, overlooks the gorgeous bay in the bustling Brickell district in Downtown Miami. The tenants look more like models than the self-proclaimed "nerds" they say they are. And, their businesses are only steps away from becoming some of the most impressive to come out of South Florida. To think that all this action is happening only a short, three and half mile drive across the causeway from South Beach.

"Miami is the ultimate international city, attracting people from all over the world seeking out the American dream," said Philippe Houdard, co-founder of Pipeline Brickell.

“People are scrambling, getting creative, striving, climbing. There hasn’t been time for a rigid social hierarchy to form in the city, and there are very few restrictions that many older and more established cities have. So it’s perfect for entrepreneurs.”



Tenants at Pipeline represent the diversity that embodies Miami. Entrepreneurs and veteran professionals that work at Pipeline hail from all over the globe and from a range of different industries including technology, media, legal and even private equity. Houdard believes that there is value in combining so much professional diversity in one space, giving entrepreneurs access to professional services and to seasoned professionals with their own “battle scars” who can provide advice and hope to newbusiness owners.

Miami might carry its own set of stigmas, but “Magic City” is poised to become the next great American city for entrepreneurship.

After all, it is a major US city, as well as a gateway to South and Central America and Europe. It is quite the global city in its own right, and now it is about to be known in our own country for what it can do in entrepreneurship.

“Miami is a great international hub with a unique positioning as central to all of Latin America and the Caribbean,” Rob Follows, CEO of STS Capital Partners. He added that the large number of entrepreneurs involved in organizations such as Young Presidents’ Organization and World Presidents’ Organization are evidence of a strong and developing entrepreneurial market in Miami.

Follows, a serial entrepreneur himself, is the owner of a firm that specializes in helping businesses find partnerships that can help them grow exponentially through investments, mergers and acquisitions. He divides his time between Toronto, Vegas, Barbados, London and Miami. In Miami, he sees the potential in LiveAnswer.

“LiveAnswer is smaller than our normal deal size,” added Follows. “It was their fantastic, unique and [scalable] technology that we see as making them very attractive to strategic investors both nationally and internationally.” LiveAnswer has revolutionized the archaic business model of the call center with a fully integrated software program that maximizes the time being used by agents at call centers.

The new technology helps small business owners create a script, check messages and control calls in real time to leverage their use of call center agents in the most effective way possible. The program has been used by the likes of Uber and Baskin-Robbins, but could have CEO’s like Tony

Hsieh at a bidding war for the software.

“Because of the fertile market and fantastic entrepreneurs like Adam and Matt [at LiveAnswer] that Miami attracts, and their ability to connect with STS, we are able to work with them to position their technology with strategic investors, and international investors, that will be happy to pay much more than any local financial investors would for an interest in LiveAnswer,” said Follows.

Adam Boalt founded LiveAnswer a little over a year ago to solve the customer service issues that many business owners face when they are away from their phone during a meeting or other business call. His software also maximizes unused time that phone agents have between calls at large call centers. Little did Boalt know, he had solved a decade old problem in the call center industry.

“I realized that one of the challenges of being an entrepreneur is being able to get to the phone,” said Boalt, whose epiphany came to him after meeting with several of Pipeline’s tenants.

“When you’re an entrepreneur, you’re doing so many things at the same time. You are running around all day, and all of a sudden you have customers calling – or you’re in a meeting when a customer calls.”

Boalt was first introduced to Pipeline at the invitation from Houdard's business partner Todd Oretsky to try out the new office for one week. After his first day, he had paid a year in advance for a desk at Pipeline, not sure what he was going to do with it since he had just sold his own startup. While trying to figure out his next steps, he became a mentor to several tenants, but soon found that some of the challenges faced by entrepreneurs would become his biggest asset.

“I started to realize that the answering service space was really boring and could be so much better,” said Boalt, who started researching call centers to find ways to deliver the service to entrepreneurs and small businesses. “But, ultimately, what I found is that the technology in the call center industry – specifically the answering service – was very antiquated and it was just terrible.”



Adam Boalt (left), founder of LiveAnswer in Miami. (Photo Credit: Crea7ive Interactive Advertising)

Boalt has outgrown his one desk and has taken over about a dozen desks, in addition to a handful of office suites that are used as call center labs. While his company continues to grow quickly, Boalt has decided to not move out of Pipeline anytime in the near future. He credits the workspace and community for helping him find his inspiration, as well as new clients and professional development.

Business owners Paula and Pia Celestino also realized the value of being part of the entrepreneurial community when they moved into Pipeline.

The founders of Crea7ive, a digital strategy and branding agency that specializes in targeting millennials and the Latin American market, make the hour drive from Broward county near Fort Lauderdale to Miami so they can be part of the ecosystem. Through networking opportunities in Miami, they have been able to land clients like Wendy's, Kraft, Dreamworks and Disney.

“When we decided to move to Pipeline, we started to put more effort into networking,” said Pia, who explained that they were able to work their way up to acquiring larger projects by starting with small opportunities they would get through people they met while networking. “It shows that you're willing to do what it takes. I started working in my bedroom as a teenager, so I know that I have to work my way up – nothing is going to come easy or for free.”

On the day we met, The Celestino sisters were enthusiastic and polite, with their hair curled and dressed in high heels and vibrant tops. They speak English very well, considering it's their second language, and are obviously shrewd business owners. However, besides being well dressed and sharp, what made them strong businesswomen was their journey that brought them to entrepreneurship. It is a story of resilience that all entrepreneurs know well, but still worlds apart from those entrepreneurs who started in their parents' basement.

Pia and Paula moved to Miami as teenagers in 2001 during Argentina's social and economic crises. Their father had been a successful business owner, but they had lost most of their money after their move to the United States. As a result, the teenage girls were forced to take on jobs in a new country in order to help their displaced family, which also included their parents and baby brother. Pia, who was only 16 at the time, took a year off school in order to help make ends meet.

After about 20 failed jobs – which accounted for an assortment of occupations – Pia found an opportunity to do work she loved as a way to help her family. She built out a website for a doctor in exchange for a surgery that her father needed but couldn't afford. Using design skills she had honed while helping out at her father's company, she taught herself how to code in order to complete her task. This opportunity, or "necessity," led to several freelance jobs. She was able to finish school, and eventually asked Paula, who had done a lot of administrative and customer service work for several companies, to help her turn it into a company a few years later while they were attending college.

"I believe that immigrants develop a resilience due to having to be out of your comfort zone all the time," said the older, brunette sister, Paula.

“Having to face your fears, having to adjust constantly to a new environment, learn a new language. All that brings that tough side of you and survival mode kicks in. That’s really how it happened. You don’t know your potential until you are pushed to your limits.”



Pia (left) and Paula Celestino, founders of Crea7ive Interactive Agency and hosts of Startup Weekend Diversity Miami. (Photo Credit: Crea7ive Interactive Advertising)

Like Boalt, Pia and Paula had turned what they saw as a challenge into their biggest asset. What other companies lacked in how they targeted the Hispanic market, Crea7ive was able to fill that gap by understanding the language and

the culture well.

Being in Miami allowed them to study all the different cultures and learn how to fill all the different culture gaps found in Miami. That exercise has allowed them to create that into a specialty at their firm.

“When we started, we really saw our background as a disadvantage – we didn’t speak perfect English, we were young young and we’re girls,” added Paula. “So to think that our Hispanic background would become our niche is funny now. We struggled a lot with not being in a country that we necessarily knew. Being in different environment and different culture was difficult.”

Besides Crea7ive, the Celestino’s have several other ventures under their brightly colored sleeves. Pia is completing the prototype for EyeTalker, a pair of glasses that helps blind people read by speaking the text on the page. She won the Miami Herald Business Plan Challenge in 2013 for the original concept. Paula is also working on another venture called Kloset Karma, a clothing exchange marketplace that won her the business competition the following year.

As entrepreneurs always trying to solve societal challenges, like the inability to read text or the inability to find something to wear (it’s a real thing), Pia and Paula are also solving some challenges at the micro level in their own community, by bringing Startup Weekend to Miami.

Startup Weekend Diversity Miami aims to showcase Miami's diversity, as well as bring together the Miami entrepreneurial community – one that is still very much segregated by industry and scattered throughout the Miami metropolitan area. Paula was inspired to bring the global event to Miami, after attending Startup Weekend in Tampa last year.

She said that is helped her feel like she belonged as an entrepreneur, in a space where she once felt very isolated as a woman in tech.

“We wanted to create something intimate – an open forum for people to be raw,” said Pia. “We started receiving feedback and seeing all these exciting things happening in Miami, that we wanted to bring that experience to people.”

Startup Weekend Diversity Miami, co-organized by Pia and Paula Celestino, starts Friday May 29th at Venture Hive. Attendees will have 54 hours to turn an idea into a business, as well as hear from seasoned entrepreneurs like Adam Boalt of LiveAnswer.