



David Lewinski Photography

Full Press Success: A Q&A with John Gongos

By: Jon Zemke

Business is basketball. Basketball is business. Both are John Gongos and his firm, [Gongos Research](#).

All three (basketball, Gongos and his namesake company) are evident in Gongos' sphere of influence. The 50-year-old's fit appearance belies a man who has been playing pickup games his whole life. He coaches his three kids' basketball teams and plays a basketball game every Thursday with much younger friends and co-workers. But shooting guard Gongos can still curl around a pick and make string music with ease.

"I am too old to do anything else, but I can hit that jump shot every time," Gongos says. "If you want to know how I play basketball, I play like [Rip Hamilton](#)."

Gongos never came close to playing pro basketball, but the game heavily influences his professional life. When his 20-year-old marketing research firm recently expanded in Auburn Hills, he installed a basketball court for employees and clients. His company's monthly communication meetings overlook it and those meetings often come with a sports analogy or two.

Gongos, a [Detroit Pistons](#) season ticket holder, also derives business lessons from the nearby Palace of Auburn Hills. His marketing research firm recently crossed the 100-employee mark, thanks to double-digit growth in recent years. He looked up to the Bill Davidson-owned Pistons franchise, [one of the most successful in the NBA](#), with admiration and noticed when that business recently lost its leader.

"It taught me a lesson that things can change very quickly," Gongos says. "In a year, you could see that organization was falling apart. In two years, it has crumbled. I just hope they sell it as soon as possible and get a good leader in there. If you don't have a good leader, then that shows you what happens." The president & CEO of [Gongos Research](#) recently sat down in his corner office with *Metromode's* Jon Zemke to talk about entrepreneurship, the value of employees and the U.S. Census. Not surprisingly basketball made its way into the conversation a few times.



You described yourself as more of a market researcher who happens to own a business than an entrepreneur. What's the difference between the two?

[Entrepreneurs](#) have it in their blood. There is something exciting about starting a company and they will start multiple companies. That has never really entered my mind. My passion has always been marketing research since college, but I never wanted to start a market research company.



Does this mean anyone who is passionate about something can turn it into a business?

There are a lot of people who are passionate about what they're doing, but they might be more of an idea person than a manager or a leader. To have a successful business you need passion, but you need the right skills to lead a company, too.

So you need both business skills and passion?

You either need to do that or find someone who you can co-exist with.

You list your company's core values as "humanistic, intelligent, passionate, and pride." Sum up how those core values make your business successful?

The core values drive our company culture. The culture is the No. 1 reason why we have such high retention. People work and stay here because they say they love the people. What they're really saying is they love the culture because the people make up the culture.

Isn't pride one of the seven deadly sins?

It depends on how you define pride. Pride works for us because it leads to high quality.

Describe how the recent rise of the Internet has changed market research?

Our industry has changed more in the last five years than in the 15 years prior to that. It's allowed us to gather data with more effective surveys for a lower cost. It will probably change even more in the next three years.

Are the challenges your company faces today anything you could have planned for 10 years ago?

There are two things we started doing 10 years ago that have gotten us from there to here. We have become very good at attracting top talent, and that started back then.

How would you define top talent?

People that are high-performers in our environment and fit into our culture. There is a lot of top talent we pass on because we don't think they would be a good fit for our culture. In the long run it has helped us because we get the right people here.

Going back to your previous question, we started a strategic planning process 10 years ago that is integral to our success. We follow it to a tee, and it really guides where we go as a company.

Are you afraid adhering too strictly to that strategy will impede your company's ability to be innovative or make it miss opportunities?

No. Strategic planning has actually accelerated our innovation. It helps us prioritize our goals, so we go from 20 goals to five. When you have 20 priorities, you have too many priorities. The beauty of this process is if you have five priorities, you will do those well.

Change can often kill a company, but yours has grown despite a rapidly changing industry. How did you and your team make that happen?

We have been much more forward thinking, and spending the time looking where our industry is going. It goes back to our strategic planning process.

Gongos Research has grown steadily over its 20 years. Is this a byproduct of hard work, focus and innovation or has there been a specific philosophy or idea that made this growth possible?

We have never had the goal of becoming a big company. Our goal has always been become better or become great. We have a lot of overachievers. When we become better or great at something, the business follows. There have been times when we had to control our growth. Last year we grew 30 percent when we probably could have grown 45 percent. We know if we grow too fast it's going to have negative long-term effects.

Gongos Research habitually hires interns. Your first intern is now your COO. What would you tell a business that wants to start an internship program but can never seem to find the time to get around to it?

If we can find talented interns it's going to help prepare them for life and we're going to get strong support at a lower cost than hiring a full-time employee. It's also a great way for us to screen the people who will shine in our environment. Our hiring success rate is so much higher when hiring people out of internships. There is only so much you can learn in an interview.

So hiring someone out of an interview is almost like making a cold call?

It feels that way. It feels like it's such a risk. Hiring is so expensive when you make a mistake.

Discussions of Michigan's "brain drain" are rampant. Those who haven't suffered its effects dismiss the idea. How does your company address talent retention?

Our experience has been that if young people can find a great job in a field that they like, they will stay here. People really want to stay here if they find the right company.



Is it more about finding the right job or company or finding the right community?

For younger people it's more about the company and passion of what they're doing.

During the recent recession, Gongos Research countered the conventional wisdom of laying people off and instead empowered them to take on the company's business-development strategy and find new business. The company ended up growing despite the downturn. What were the logistics behind that decision?

We put people into product development knowing we were going to need them six or 12 months from now. It made so much more sense to redeploy them and accelerate the recovery for us rather than cut costs, save a few dollars in the short run, have to hire new people a few months later and be two steps behind. It's not just replacing parts. People are our most important asset.



A lot of recent entrepreneurial activity is focused on building a business to create a liquidity event within a few years. Gongos Research is an entrepreneurial venture that's oriented toward your long-term personal involvement. Should the region focus more on building long-term businesses instead of serial exits?

It would provide much more staying power. It would be better for the region if there was more staying power and stability in the economy. What people don't think about is the effect liquidity events have on the job market.

What is the best thing the city of Detroit can take from the recently release U.S. Census statistics?

The biggest thing is if the city can become more nimble. Make decisions quicker. Take action quicker. All of these solutions require change, and it just seems like the city isn't nimble. I'd love to see some experiments happen quicker.

What can Metro Detroit take from these numbers?

It's going to be businesses and jobs that save our region. Michigan is a great place to live. People aren't leaving because of the weather. It's the jobs.

