VisionSpring: A Lens for Growth at the Base of the Pyramid

Jordan Kassalow, Chairman and Co-Founder of VisionSpring, settled into his seat and gathered his thoughts in preparation for the long plane ride back to New York City. VisionSpring uses a market-based approach to sell affordable reading glasses to the poor. He had just spent the last two weeks in India, VisionSpring's fastest growing location. While it had been another successful year for VisionSpring, Jordan knew that the next 12 months would be critical in fulfilling the vision of the organization he and Scott Berrie had founded five years before.

Through the third quarter of 2006, VisionSpring had trained 371 local entrepreneurs in India who collectively had sold over 29,000 pairs of glasses. VisionSpring had primarily distributed its reading glasses through Vision Entrepreneurs (VEs) who marketed and sold the reading glasses in rural communities. In addition to the VE channel, a franchise partner channel had emerged in the past year. In the franchise partner channel, VisionSpring leveraged existing distribution networks of entrepreneurs to sell its reading glasses. Jordan knew that each approach had strengths and weaknesses. He wondered which model would allow VisionSpring to scale more effectively while creating the societal impact and financial sustainability that he and funders were hoping for.

Jordan revisited VisionSpring's mission statement, something to which he had given a lot of thought recently: "VisionSpring improves the economic condition of families in the developing world by broadening the availability of reading glasses and other health products and services. We achieve this through VisionSpring entrepreneurs and other market-based distribution solutions." He wondered whether the emphasis of VisionSpring's mission should be to increase access to reading glasses or to empower entrepreneurs. VisionSpring, itself, could develop a basket of health products and services similar to some of its franchise partners, thus bringing in more business to the entrepreneurs and more products and services to the customers.

In addition, Jordan knew anecdotally that VisionSpring was having an impact in poor communities. However, funders, such as Acumen Fund, were increasingly demanding that VisionSpring find ways to more effectively measure this impact. Jordan was proud of VisionSpring's growth and impact in such a short amount of time. However, he knew that he and his team had their work cut out for themselves. Jordan had to organize his thoughts, consult with his team, and develop some concrete recommendations before meeting with his board and key funders the following month.