Capital, Connections, and Community

Solomon Ali: The Biggest Name You've Never Heard

By Patricia Miller

For African-American entrepreneurs, breaking into the technology sector can be a struggle. Accessing capital, making executive connections, obtaining patents, and ultimately marketing one's IP is a costly and time-consuming endeavor.

That's where Solomon Ali comes in. He's sat on the board for one quarter of all publicly-traded, black-owned companies in the United States. His passion is connecting startups to capital and helping African-American entrepreneurs launch their businesses.

He knows a lot about connections and capital. His energy company, NDR Energy Group, is one of the largest minority-owned companies in the United States and his latest initiative, SYS Smart Home Technology, is working to make smart home technology affordable for low-income communities.

Ali is also the CEO of Revolutionary Concepts, which owns the rights to more than 60 home-tech patents. If you don't recognize the name, it's because they don't make anything. They simply hold the patents to the technology that makes the smart home possible.

Video doorbells, smart security cameras, and automated garage door openers rely on two-way audio/video communication triggered by a sensor. Well, Revolutionary Concepts owns that tech and sells the licensing rights to companies like Ring, Amazon, August Home, Chamberlain, HealthCo, LiveWatch, Skybell, and Door Bird.

Now, Revolutionary Concepts is giving SYS the ability to put smart tech into people's

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homes for less than the cost of a cable TV subscription.

In this exclusive interview, Ali shares his insights on black-owned tech startups, his latest project, and the future of smart home systems.

Innovation & Tech Today: What are some barriers to entry that prevent black-owned technology startups from gaining ground?

Solomon Ali: Capital, capital, capital. Access to capital. Access to the people who can help them tell the correct story, and their financial story, to get access to capital.

When you're in technology, it's not like you have brick and mortar that you can use as an asset to borrow money, so it's all dependent upon someone investing or believing that it can go from A to Z.

Hiring the scientists or engineers to help you put everything together, and hiring attorneys to help you file your patents correctly so that you would be protected, if you are awarded these patents – both for the United States and abroad – that's costly.

When a minority company is starting out – I strongly believe this – they have to stop making the same mistake most entrepreneurs make. We've taken whatever resources we've had, whether it was from retirement accounts, equity, family, or friends, and we spend it in the wrong places.

We think we are not going to need any more capital, not understanding that we're going to need a lot more capital. In other words, we didn't count the costs, because we didn't know how to count the costs, and that's where most

entrepreneurs fail. They fail to understand what the true cost to build something would be.

I&T Today: What was your strategy when launching SYS Smart Home Technology?

SA: With SYS, we wanted to create a marketing company, so we looked at the industry itself. The security industry is an $84 billion industry…

So I said, "Let's go after the market share, and if we can get 10 percent of the market share, that would be awesome. Probably won't happen though, so if we get five percent, that would be great. Probably won't happen. So if we can just get 0.5 percent to one percent, we win. Probably will happen."

I told my team, "We need to talk about a winning marketing strategy so that we can go out and grab households, because we're not talking security systems anymore, we're talking smart homes, we're talking an extension of one's self."

I can give my home a command, now it obeys that command: "Turn on the lights. Turn on my alarm system. Open the garage. Turn off my alarm system. Unlock my door." See, all of that falls under our patents, and so what we have to do is go and educate.

The first obstacle is, everyone thinks [these products] are so expensive, and it is expensive, but there are ways to get around it. So we said, "Let's fellowship with the churches. They're struggling now and local communities will benefit if we turn around and partner with them in providing the systems for free to those people within their congregations or ministries that they want to support."

So, by doing that, we give them systems for free. Now that supports the different ministries; people just pay their monitoring fee and then we donate 20 percent back to the church so they can fund which ever ministries they wish to fund. So now, their people have control of their property value.

We put a whole package together that includes the door lock, some floodlight cameras, some doorbell cameras, and the security system itself. All they would have to do is pay for the monitoring and we would give them the complete system for free – plus they would have TV too, so we are able to cut their costs.

We decided to do something that no other competitor – such as ADT, CPI, or anyone else out there – is currently doing.

I&T Today: How do you see the smart home technology market evolving?

SA: I believe it will continue to evolve, well, to where it was in that cartoon my brother used to watch, *The Jetsons*. I can go to my smartphone and tell the lawnmower to cut the grass and it'll cut the grass. I can turn off the water from anywhere in the country. In fact, I can cut the grass from anywhere in the country. I can unlock my doors from anywhere in the country.

That will continue to evolve, and we're excited about it, because whatever the mind can create, you will be able to tell and command your house to do it. And for us, to be on the forefront of that technology, and have companies license various pieces of that from us, is very exciting. ∎