

# BUSINESS RECORD *MONDAY*

St. Charles County Business Record

Born without arms, John Foppe has had to learn to re-engineer every aspect of day-to-day life. Over time, and through incredible tribulation, he learned that the inability to do something did not rest on the lack of resources or vision – it is the emotional reaction to meeting an obstacle, even a small one, head on. Today, John drives, writes, paints, cooks, shops, doing virtually everything others do but using his feet instead of hands.

John's public speaking career started while in high school after he experienced a spiritual awakening during a missionary trip to Haiti. Since 1995, John has owned and operated John Foppe Seminars Inc., a successful training business that has taken him to businesses and organizations throughout the United States and abroad, delivering high-impact presentations on attitude, personal growth and performance improvement. Using poignant and humorous stories of overcoming adversity to encourage others, John has given motivational addresses to the NFL's Miami Dolphins as well as Fortune 500 companies such as Boeing, General Electric and State Farm Insurance.

This year John launched a new enterprise, Visionary Velocity Worldwide, which will take his insight and elocution to a new level. John is also a protégé of best-selling author and motivational speaker, Zig Ziglar, with whom he has worked for the last 14 years.

A native of Breese, Ill., John attended Mater Dei High School in that town. He went on to Saint Louis University, where he graduated cum laude with a bachelor's degree in communication in 1992. Seven years later, he returned to Saint Louis University, where he earned a master's degree in social work with a concentration on family therapy. In the early 1990s John was named as one of "Ten Outstanding Young People in Illinois" by the Illinois Jaycees; he also was included as one of "Ten Outstanding Young Americans" named by the U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce. His book, "What's Your Excuse? Making the Most of What You Have," has been translated into six languages. He and his wife, Christine, currently make their home in downtown St. Louis. You may visit John and his philosophy on [www.johnfoppe.com](http://www.johnfoppe.com).

**This year, you changed the name of your enterprise from John Foppe Seminars to Visionary Velocity Worldwide. Why the name change?**

"John Foppe Seminars is a brand that's going away. I'm going to continue to speak and do seminars but less in a motivational speaking capacity and more into the heart of business matters. My goal is to take my philosophy to the world of visionaries and change agents, helping them turn visions into outcomes."

**This is an evolution of what you've been doing for the last 20 years.**

"Right. It's been almost 20 years I've been



**John P. Foppe,  
Author and  
Professional  
Speaker**

doing motivational speaking, and over the last, say, seven years, I kept hearing the same complaint from businesses: How difficult it was to get things done. They have these initiatives or projects they're trying to push through, and I just kept hearing that same complaint. So I got to thinking about all this and what can I do to help these people with their issues, and I started connecting some dots in terms of the mentality of organization, this lack of efficacy, this victimism, whatever you want to call it. So that's how I came to this: I started seeing a mindset within organizations, and the collective term I use to describe it is exasperation. And exasperation is my catch-all term because it means everything from frustration to complacency to apathy to anger ..."

**And these are mostly managers you're talking about?**

"No, I'm talking about everybody. I see it in all levels of an organization. See, here's the deal: We don't point the finger of blame anymore. We point the finger of responsibility. Workers point at the managers. Managers point at the workers. The problem is, they're in this silent agreement, and in terms of productivity, it locks things. So I've called it exasperation. And let me dig down on that a little: I think things like the loss of health care benefits, the loss of pensions -- look around, you see ineffective government, corrupt religious institutions -- I think it's created a real sense of cynicism and resignation with people. It's silent in organizations because it would be taboo to speak of it, but it's out there, and people wonder why things don't get done. I think some people have learned or believe that their company is not loyal to them anymore, and I think some people in turn are not loyal to the company either."

**It's the golden rule: If the company treats the employees right, the employees treat the company right.**

"Yes, but I'm not going to single out one group in terms of blame or responsibility because that's

what too many experts have done all along. If we really want to move things forward, get things done, everybody has to step up."

**I assume you're talking primarily about the corporate workplace.**

"Primarily, but I think the problem can exist anywhere -- in big business, in nonprofit organizations, in associations."

**What is your technique in enabling people to achieve desired outcomes?**

"I maintain that the reason visions don't translate in to outcomes is that the vision gets garbled like a code can get garbled. Moreover, it gets lost in people's perceptions, in their reactions and in their practices at work. I call it a code of exasperation. We have people out there in the workplace that are just surviving, just getting by. You go into these corporations, and some of the employees look like ... the passion has been sucked out of them, they don't dare look over their cubicle wall. So human behavior being what it is, you can't purge this code, but you can rewrite it. And what my work centers on is helping people move from being a survivor to being an executor. Business execution is the challenge of the 21st century."

**But how is your program different from others?**

"Fundamentally, I focus on helping people create a code of execution where they change their seeing and their doing and their being. That's a lot more than just changing their attitudes -- attitude is just the tip of the iceberg. I'm talking about getting down to where you're living, breathing and sleeping execution at work, making things happen. That means taking it on with full integrity and making it a part of your identity."

**How much did your disability have to do with formulating this approach?**

"A great deal because, as a disabled person, I think I have a really different perspective about life. As human beings, we fuse being and doing all the time. In other words, there's no distinction between the two. We don't see the difference there. Some speakers even say you equate your net worth with your self-worth -- and that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that as a disabled person there are things I haven't been able to do but I've had to learn how to be powerful, be creative, be responsible. And when you get the person right, the world starts changing around you. I still don't have arms. How is it that I can travel around the world, own a home, marry a lovely person, run a business? My lack of arms has not changed, something else has changed. And so, in my mind, talking about a change of attitude -- well, that's just scratching the surface."

**In your seminars do you give them the kernel of your philosophy and then you hope that they act upon it after you're gone?**

"I hope that they understand it. And sure, I hope it's an invitation they have me come in and work with them on an extended basis. See, that's what motivational speakers do, they just give a message, and they leave. My goal is to stick around longer to help them understand the concepts fully. Well, maybe it is just a one-hour keynote, but my hope is that we'll work together down the road through seminars and coaching and things like that. Because that's the problem: We're stuck in that quick-fix mentality, and then we wonder why things don't get done."

**And then the other problem is we have a finite number of hours in the day and a lot of them are spent in doing what we have to do to pay the bills.**

"But see, this program is a radical change in thinking. It's a shift away from the mindset that we've always had -- industrial command and control, a hierarchy built like a structure. And now the thinkers out there who are really revolutionizing business practices are understanding that you have to treat business as more like a living organism. It's not about structure, and that old industrial mindset doesn't work in the age of the knowledge worker ... and you say there's only 24 hours in a day. Let me explain how I address this: The world operates from a perspective that we have to have something to do something to be something. In other words, you have to have time, money, technology, more personnel and so on, and once you have all that in place, you can do something. You can make great cars, say, and once you do that, then you get to be the industry leader, No. 1. That's the way the world operates. When we get out of bed, we have to have something to do something to be something. Except there's a problem with that: What happens if you don't have it? It's a nonstarter. Again, this is where my perspective as a disabled man comes in. According to that logic, I shouldn't be able to do half the stuff that I do because I don't have the ability to do it."

**Fortune dealt you a tough hand.**

"Yes, and I've had to learn that you switch this mindset from have-do-be to be-do-have. In other words, with commitment and persistence, you've got to be responsible, be loving, be creative, be hard-working. And see, that comes down to human choice. The most powerful thing a human being has, which confounds all the philosophers, the theologians, the anthropologists, is our ability

to make a choice, our free will. And choice doesn't take any time, it doesn't cost any money. You just choose, and once you choose to do it, to be something, you bring your integrity, your identity, your commitment, all that, into alignment."

**Do you have an example from your own life?**

"I have an older brother, Tom, who is an artist, and I used to whine about it because he could put his canvas up on an easel and paint with his hands, while I needed to paint down on the floor with my toes. It wasn't easy, all that. And my teachers challenged me, thank God, and eventually I got this distinction of being an artist. And really, all you need is a tablet of paper and paint. Now, was I any good at it at first? No, but by just starting, just choosing to be an artist, no matter what it was going to look like, I made a positive choice to study it, practice it, commit to it, and the more you do it, the better you get. Now I have paintings on the wall. Now I can have, see? And that's the mindset we get stuck in; we get stuck in the have-do-be."

**I met you in 1999, and I see that in the intervening years, you've gotten a master's degree, you've moved from the hamlet of Breese, Ill., to St. Louis, and you've gotten married. The last one, congrats, and how does Christine fit into your career?**

"Christine is immensely helpful [laughs]. We work together closely. She had a background in the hotel industry, director of sales, and just having that sales experience is critical. She also manages the product inventory, making sure that stuff gets where it's supposed to be, around the world. She does all the books. She runs things behind the scenes. But one of the most critical areas is travel. My international work has really opened up in the last three years. And while I can travel by myself, it's rigorous to say the least. I don't think I, alone, could be gone three-and-a-half weeks and go around the world, like we did in May, especially when you're lugging seminar materials and meeting clients. So she just brings a whole wealth of experience and skills and support."

**Working on your master's degree at SLU, you commuted some 90 miles round trip for over two years, that's commitment, especially when the roads were snowy in winter. Do you recall what you were thinking during those drives?**

"Well, even then I knew that I wanted to go beyond motivational speaking -- and I don't want to dis that because all good speakers today have to be motivational -- but I wanted more than people in the audience to feel inspired and clapping and saying, 'Oh, that was wonderful!' And then three days later, after they're back in their workaday lives, they forgot about it. But to the question: What was I thinking? Maybe it was one of the things that perpetually intrigues me, namely, why is it that some people have everything and can do nothing? I mean, some of the wealthiest people complain about how hard it is to get their employees to do things, complain about how hard it is to get their kids to take responsibility. How is it that some people can have everything and do nothing, while other people have very little yet they are incredibly resourceful? What is it that calls some people to greatness and other people to mediocrity? It's fascinating."

**You went skiing in Colorado a few years back. People break their legs in ski accidents. Do you look back on**

**that now and think it was foolhardy? If anything happened to your legs ...**

"Oh, I'd really be in a pickle if something happened to my legs. Was it foolhardy? No. Was it risky? Sure, but anything worthwhile is risky."

**But you didn't do that lightly.**

"No, and I've skied since then, in Utah and Austria, and I'll do it again. I'm no Olympic skier, but at least I do it. And I'll tell you what: When you ski down those mountains and you're gliding past tall, snow-covered pines on each side of you, that's better than going down the Champs Elysee in Paris or Las Ramblas in Mexico City. But here's the thing: I've got a great coach, my best friend, Neil, and I wasn't up there alone."

**You've been on the motivational speaking circuit with lots of people, one of them was Rudy Rudiger, whose stint on the Notre Dame football team inspired the film "Rudy." Do you envision a movie about your life in the foreseeable future.**

"I really don't envision a movie about me, although my wife does. No, my work is more centered on the solution and content of educating people. It's not important to me whether I'm famous."

**Is there one decision you wish that you could revisit and do over?**

"Yes, that I didn't take the opportunity while in college to live abroad. I mean, I've traveled to Europe 17 times, but in college, that's the time in your life for travel, the time when you're more footloose and fancy-free."

**How does extensive travel affect a globetrotter like yourself?**

"We're an awesome country. Americans are incredibly nice and loving and giving and all of that, but we don't have a clue about what's going on in the world. My trips to various countries have given me a different perspective of not only America, but how the world operates in general, and I equate it to this: It's like living in your home for 20 years and all of a sudden discovering a window that you never knew existed, and then you can look out that window and see a totally different view of your surroundings. That's what travel has done for me. I just wish Americans understood more about how the world operates. We're too insular."

**You're still in touch with Zig Ziglar?**

"Yeah, I was in Dallas in Spring. I help him out with a goal-setting seminar he does twice a year. He's still going strong. He just released another book."

**Do you have another book coming out?**

"I'm working on a second book, yes, tentatively titled 'Make It Happen: Small Things That Topple Big Plans.' It's a business book centered on translating visions in to outcomes."

**Look in to your crystal ball. What do you see yourself doing five years from now?**

"I see myself continuing to speak, train and coach professionally on an international level. My personal goal is for Christine and I to live in Europe, probably Austria, at least six months of the year. And if my business plan executes the way I want it to, that will happen."