

Five Key Ways To Make Your Business A Success

Our company has reached a milestone this year that I am very proud of - it's our fifth year in business. There was no grand celebration (unless a few high fives and a couple of beers count!) or stopping to pat ourselves on the back, because as many entrepreneurs know, the line between success and failure is very thin. Instead, I feel this milestone has motivated us to drive forward with even more energy and determination than ever before.

But on a personal note, I can't help but reflect on some of the key "Aha!" moments that stand out in my mind, and maybe they will resonate with you as well.

1. Admit you are not an expert in finance. Or HR. Or marketing (unless this is your service offering). As an entrepreneur, it's fully understood that you must wear many hats. Especially when starting out, there quite simply may not be enough money to afford this support. But you got into business because of your expertise or a great concept. Be sure to close the gap as soon as you can afford it. Focus on the product or service and company value proposition - this is where you make money.

2. Find a mentor. Or better yet, more than one. Quite simply, you need a personal board of directors. This is important whether you have business partners or not - outside perspective is invaluable. It's especially important if you don't have partners, so you can be exposed to other like-minded people and avoid isolation. It's a misconception that others won't want to take the time. In fact I think it's quite the opposite. I've found that entrepreneurs generally want to share their stories and really do enjoy helping others write their own. Personally, I didn't seek out mentors until a friend challenged me on why I wasn't doing this. Greenville has such a strong and supportive business community that if you aren't taking advantage of the pool of local thought leaders, then you are wasting a great opportunity. After all, if you believe the saying that "You are a reflection of the people you spend the most time with," then surround yourself with the right influences and thinkers.

3. Work ethic vs. credentials when hiring. Not everyone will agree with me here. Unless you are talking about a very specific function (engineering, accounting, etc.), the person

who is motivated, hungry, and is a good personality fit for the team wins over the person with the degree in my experience. A formal education is important and shouldn't be disregarded. But it's important to find people with strong purpose who are willing to do any task versus someone who has a sense of entitlement or feels things are beneath them because of schooling. That's not to say that you shouldn't pay these people well for hard work - don't skimp on the people who have got your back.

4. Product vs. perfection. I tend to get wrapped up in the details, so this one is challenging for me. Offering a flawed product or service is clearly unacceptable, but there is also a point where you have a great product that needs to get out the door. So get it out the door. Excellence should always be the goal. Perfection can get in the way.

5. Dial in your margins. Let's face it - when starting out, unless you are recreating a past venture, you really don't have a full picture on what your margins are. The focus in the early years is to establish a brand and make money. But to really transition into a more mature phase of the business, you need to understand what your data is telling you. How much money do you really need to make from your widget to carry your overhead expenses? What is your lifeline (i.e., how long can you survive into the future if your sales dry up today)? Do you honestly understand what your overhead expenses are (this is where having a subject matter expert comes in handy)? If you have set a target margin, are you achieving it consistently? And if not, are you just hoping that more sales will help, or are you really preparing to make some hard decisions on getting to that number you need?

Finally, don't forget about balance. Running a business can be a grind. But make it home in time for dinner, and be present when you're there. Although I don't believe you can achieve perfect balance as an entrepreneur, you certainly need to make sure you are putting some weight on the other side of that scale.

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