

Advice on Taking an Entrepreneurial Leap

Brent Bowers

Terry Corbell, a management consultant, has some advice for all the readers who responded to an invitation I made last month to send him questions about running a business. Make a list of your weaknesses, he told those who asked how to get started. Because so many e-mail messages poured in, Mr. Corbell, the author of a column called "The Biz Coach" that appears on the Web sites of an all-news radio and television station in Seattle, chose to address in this column the ones that reflected three major entrepreneurial dilemmas: how to take the leap into the small business world, how to market your product and, for retail ventures, how to find the best location.

The most common query he got was how to get started. Tristan Holyoke, for example, wrote, "I am a young educated 'wanna-be' entrepreneur with more ideas than minutes, but no idea how to move forward." And H. Eddie Nabel asked, "What advice do you have for a new, ambitious, driven, hungry, outside-the-box thinking financial adviser during these tough times?"

The answer, basically, is the ancient Greek injunction to know thyself. "Budget a couple of hours for quiet time to reflect on your career," Mr. Corbell said.

Then, he said, compose a list of all your shortcomings on one or two sheets of paper. "Fear takes the No. 1 spot on most people's list," he said. Other common deficiencies include lack of self-confidence, trouble managing money, a desire to please everybody and disagreeable bluntness in conversation.

As part of that exercise, he said, write a personality strength opposite each of your weaknesses. For example, if you have written "tendency to procrastinate," you may append, "dogged in fulfilling tasks." (The lesson you may draw from that is to tackle your most difficult problem first thing in the morning. If you do, the rest of your day will seem like a mini-vacation.)

After all this soul-searching, Mr. Corbell says, start dreaming. "Think about your hobbies," He said. "What do you really enjoy doing? What would you like to be paid to do?"

Now comes the serious part, and that is research. "Read about successful entrepreneurs," he said. "Contact your local Small Business Development Center for free counseling. Seek out mentors and sounding boards. They can be found everywhere, including Rotary clubs."

Next, develop a one-page "vision plan" that describes your goals and how you will achieve them, and also defines your customers. The plan should include a three- to five-word branding slogan, like his firm's "Solutions to Increase Revenue."

Then, do more research. Become an expert in your industry. Learn all you can about your future competitors. Identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats — SWOT, as it is known to marketing experts — inherent in your venture. Here's a helpful SWOT site. .

Then, write a business plan. It is a tedious process, which is why it is expensive to hire a consultant to write it. For tips, try this Small Business Administration site, which has 50 sample plans. Or try this site. .

Protect your investment by considering what form your business will take, whether a partnership (in which case, be careful about in your choice of partner), a corporation or some other variation, he says.

To finance your business, he says, you have several options, among them savings, money borrowed from family and friends, a bank loan or line of credit and cash from wealthy people known as angel investors. (Check out the Angel Capital Association's Web site. Even if angel

investors pass on your project, Mr. Corbell says, you might gain valuable feedback from them during your pitch.

Mr. Corbell advises starting entrepreneurs to avoid using credit cards or tapping into their home equity, and to be wary of venture capitalists.

He chose two questions from readers about marketing their products. One came from Emilio Bole, who sought advice on how to promote his e-commerce site for prom dresses on search engines. The other was from Amanda Gladden, a full-time worker with a tight budget who wanted to know how to increase the number of readers on her blog for women at minimum cost.

Mr. Corbell urged Mr. Bole to remember that the Internet is not an advertising medium, but rather "a consumer-buying medium — and promotion must start with the Web site content." He suggested that Web sites have these 10 traits displayed by highly rated sites like BlueNile.com and REI.com: list toll-free telephone numbers on the home page, post customer-service hours and holiday shopping deadlines prominently, limit the number of key search words that customers use to 10, respond quickly to e-mail queries, deliver products within four days, restrict displays of products to merchandise in the warehouse, hold the number of checkout clicks to six, confirm orders immediately, give customers plenty of opportunities to make additional purchases and provide them with a system to track their orders.

To both fledgling entrepreneurs, Mr. Corbell has drawn up a tip sheet for increasing their online exposure. These are his main points:

Send lots of news releases to the media. It helps if you tie your marketing to a worthy cause. And, radio stations are always looking to trade publicity for products in giveaways.

Study your competitors' Web sites for hints of how to improve yours.

Be sure to use so-called Meta tags, which are encoded in your Web pages but are invisible to users. These are read by search engines and can help put your site toward the top of the search results.

Insert videos on your Web site.

Make online publicity a priority. The most affordable online distributor Mr. Corbell has found is PRWeb Direct.

Begin an online social marketing strategy by inserting enjoyable videos on YouTube, MySpace and Facebook.

Start a blog.

Check to see your Web site is easily accessible to cellphones and other mobile devices by searching for it on mr.dev.mobi.

Finally, here is what Mr. Corbell has to say in response to a plea from M. J. Cadet, who wrote: "I purchased a franchise which specialized in high-end smoothies and health food products. I am grappling with where to locate the company."

Mr. Corbell said he could write a book on the topic but offered a few basic rules.

A store should be visible from all street angles, with no obstructions like telephone poles or billboards to impede the view of motorists. It should be next to a sizable parking lot with more than one entrance and exit path. Its location should be compatible with the habits of potential customers. A pancake restaurant, for example, needs to be on the side of the street that has the easiest access for morning commuters.

Neighboring businesses should be clean, attractive and bustling. After all, many of their customers could become yours. Additionally, their products should complement yours. If you're going to open a pizza shop, having a multiplex cinema nearby would be a boon for you.

If you're selling food, space for outdoor tables can attract customers in the warm months.

He could go on, Mr. Corbell said, but the most important rule for all beginning entrepreneurs to follow is to find the money. "You should prepare for a year surviving in an entrepreneurial jungle against all predators," he said. "Before heading out on your capitalist safari, arm yourself with enough cash to cover all living expenses and anticipated business overhead for 12 months."

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