

The accidental business man

Written by Warren Harmer

19 September 2014. For a long time, small business felt like a foreign place to me; a place I ended up by accident. I didn't grow up around it, there were no family businesses and no business education in my young life.

Both my parents had jobs and their approach to money was conservative and low risk, which was the attitude that I inherited. To compound the risk-aversion I studied science to doctorate level, spending years in large conservative institutions. But, despite the layers of conservatism I was buried under, there was a bigger voice, a whole lot of drive and fledgling independence simmering.

If you were to guess the first business that a trained scientist would end up, a restaurant probably would not be it, but there I found myself. My former partner coaxed out my inner (scared) entrepreneur and, in one inspired and unplanned moment, we jumped off the cliff into the world of business. Such confidence and brazen, ignorant optimism we had - now that I look back, knowing how many small businesses fail. It was a modest success when, 6 years on, we sold after growing from 25 seats to 100.

That experience taught me an enormous amount and awakened my passion for small business, moving on to a long and happy career as a small business consultant. For much of that time, despite my passion, I was still not totally at home as a business owner. Always surrounded by sharks that got the better of my softer nature, I felt I needed to be tougher and more ruthless. Sharp salesy types ripped me off, horrible landlords stooged me and clients went bankrupt before I got paid. I am not a hard-nosed, win-at-all-costs person where money is everything and like helping my clients succeed, simply because it is rewarding. I was trained as a scientist, where process reigns and outcomes are pure. Business turns approach on its head - where the outcome matters and process is secondary.

For the last decade I have seen inside hundreds of small businesses and their owners, how they do business and how they apply their own unique skills, experiences and knowledge. They all do some things well and they all do some things badly, but I have seen that I am not the only accidental businessperson, in fact it is almost the norm. My client list has included all types, including an air traffic controller (now franchise owner), pharmacist (now marketer) and a teacher (now fitness guru). They are all everyday people, slightly ambitious, but without the a**hole factor I once mistakenly believed to be essential for business success.

What I once felt were weaknesses, my clients have shown me are strengths. A quieter, compassionate nature is ideal for sustaining long term business relationships and building a referral base. A scientific, enquiring mind is essential for listening to clients and solving problems from first principles. My passion for systems and process is a foundation of business growth. My rigorous training in scientific report writing makes my business plans succinct. I see equivalent strengths in every business owner, where skills, experience, personalities and mindsets are applied to very different fields from their initial training. Looking at one type of business through a different lens can give a competitive advantage, as you see different ways of overcoming challenges.

It is inevitable that, over years of business, you develop a harder skin and learn ways to

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protect yourself from harm and finding your niche in the business world is essential. But I now love being an accidental businessman and embrace all of my experiences and personality, knowing well that my perspective gives me a unique approach to building small businesses.

‘Small business insights with Dr Warren Harmer’

Dr. Warren Harmer

Business planner and small business consultant

I am a cultivator of great small businesses. I have a Ph.D in science but fell into the world of small business by accident and discovered my passion. My experience owning and consulting to small businesses now spans over 17 years. I like to solve problems using a scientific approach; looking objectively at businesses to see what is happening and applying first principles. In small business, outcomes reign over theory.

Practical, hands-on advice for small business owners is sorely lacking, since most ‘experts’ have never owned one. Most business information is targeted to big business and their employees.

My objective is to offer instructive, ‘how to’ information to make business ownership easier, less stressful and more enjoyable.



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