

How To Grow Your Business

Practical advice on how to grow your small business from Businessware

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In this issue we look at ways to bridge the customer gap - focussing your efforts on bridging the gap between your product or service and your potential customers. We also look at whether positive thinking can have an effect on your business success.

Positive Thinking. Can the way you think help you achieve success in your business?

Do successful people "think" in a different way to those who are not? Or is it just that they have the midas-touch - they have an instinctive, natural sense for business?

Does psychology play a role in whether or not people are successful? And what type of mindset is required to be successful in business?

At an intellectual level most people would agree that the way someone thinks will have a significant effect on their level of success. The way someone thinks must at some point translate into their behaviour. At an emotional level however most people looking in from the outside find it very difficult to accept that this is the case. It would mean accepting that they are not able to think like a successful person. It would be better to consider them as "chosen" for success.

If you look at successful people throughout history, their thinking is everything when it comes to their success. Their thinking involves focussing with laser-like precision on what they want to achieve. They put every ounce of attention and intention on their goal and have an unshakable, unbending belief in their ability to achieve their goal.

Successful people never, ever quit from striving to achieve their goals. One way or another they will get there because their mental focus is entirely on their goal. To all intents and purposes they believe their goal is already achieved, it's just a question of when and how it's going to come about.

Does positive thinking come into this? In looking purely at the psychological aspects of success, it simply must come into it. Negativity surrounds us everyday, we are bombarded with it and if we do not consciously filter it

Bridging the Customer Gap

In any business there is a gap. A gap between your product (or service) and your customers. The wider the gap the less money you will have. So you have to focus on bridging that gap on a consistent basis. Focussing on this very simple aspect of business can reap huge rewards.

There is a mantra in Bootstrapping - you need to focus on making bullets and shooting bullets - everything else is just noise. And it's true - so many of us get caught up in the million and one tasks we have to get done each day instead of focussing on the two really important jobs that *have* to get done in order to succeed.

Bridging the gap between your product or service and your customer is another way of looking at and defining that principle in a more practical way. If your business is struggling to make sales it is simply because there is too big of a gap between the prospective customer and your product. The leap to buy from you is simply too big for the customer to make. If your sales are doing very well then the gap between the two has been bridged to a greater extent than if you are struggling to make sales.

The gap could be many things and it is a very good idea to identify what represents the gap for your business and then you can attempt to bridge it. Here are some of the most common reasons why the gap is too wide for many businesses :

- The customer has never heard of you.
- The customer doesn't know enough about you.
- Your product is too expensive.
- The product lacks something the customer needs or wants.
- The customer wants a more mature product.
- You are not communicating the benefits effectively.
- Your product is a new concept and the value is not immediately obvious.

Each one that you deal with and overcome will help bridge the gap and will mean more customers will buy from you.

So what can you do to make the gap smaller for the prospective customer? There are two ways. You can bring the customer nearer to the product or bring the product nearer to the customer. You have to find a balance that works best for your business.

1) Bringing the customer towards the product is almost entirely sales oriented. It involves finding the customers who may want your product and then convince them it is something they want. We could call this the proactive sales approach.

2) Bringing the product to the customer is about building a product that more and more customers will want to buy and telling as many of those potential customers that you have what they want. This involves marketing and a focus on developing and delivering a product or service people want and will find value from.

The first way of moving the customer towards you involves going out there and finding the customers and selling to them. For this to work you have to devote all of your own time entirely to sales or employ telesales or on-the-road sales people. However most small businesses do not have their own dedicated sales people and do not have the resources to employ them. Also in many business models this method may not work. For example if you have a restaurant this would not work too

out, it will engulf us. Most people buy into it, adopt it as part of their thinking and allow it to effect their own ability to achieve their goals. They delegate responsibility for the achievement of their goals to outside factors such as a downturn in the economy or a new competitor in their area.

Successful people invariably face the same negativity and obstacles. The difference comes where they have habitually learned to filter it out, take only the information that will be useful for the achievement of their goals and carry on focussing their attention on the end result. They believe that they have absolute responsibility for their own success and operate from that vantage point. They understand some things are outside of their control but know they can adjust and adapt to press ahead regardless of outside conditions.

This is not positive thinking as most people would have it. Most people consider positive thinking to involve a person indulging in "happy thoughts" where the real world is ignored in order for the person to feel good even though their situation may be dire.

Most people who deride positive thinking consider themselves to be "realists". Realism, as most people experience it, is to look only at their current situation and make decisions for their future based on what already exists. This dooms them to live the same reality into perpetuity.

Successful people are also realists. However they consider that the current reality is temporary and in constant change. Their positivity comes from their unerring belief about the achievement of their goal and they can see their end goal absolutely as their future reality. Successful people cater for their current situation from within the context of a wider reality. Their current situation exists and must be dealt with but they do not dwell on it as a permanent situation. They are always focussed on the future they desire which will ultimately lead them to a future reality where their goals are achieved.

There are many esoteric explanations for the power of positive thinking. However it is a fact that anything that exists in your life, from the business you have to the way your house is decorated must originally have come from a thought you had. For anything good to come about we must have at some point thought about it positively and put our current reality behind us as we strove to achieve it. This then drove our actions and our behaviour in the direction of achieving our goal. Master this habit and you are on the same track as all successful people.

well as cold calling people to come and eat at your restaurant is unlikely to bring too many flocking.

Therefore most small businesses put more energy into the other side – bringing the product closer to the customer.

Bringing the product to the customer is about responsive sales. You make the best product you can, meeting customer's needs and giving them great value. You then tell as many people as you can about it through marketing. From that point on it's up to the customer whether they take action to contact you and ultimately to buy from you. You hand responsibility for all of the things sales people would normally tackle to the customer him/herself. Using the restaurant example above you would ensure that your menu consists of food you know people want to eat, it is of high quality and then advertise locally and distribute leaflets to communicate the benefits of eating in your restaurant to potential customers and hope the word spreads.

This has negative connotations for most people. Surely being proactive is the best way!? In some circumstances it is, however it is where most small businesses should put most of their effort. Reactive selling forces you to look long and hard at how best to communicate the benefits of your product or service to the potential customer, improving your product to ensure it meets the needs of as wide a customer base as possible and finding the best ways to let as many people know about you as your budget will allow.

Most people come at it from their own experiences. A sales person, for example, going into their own business will almost always choose proactive sales whereas a tradesman in business would generally choose the reactive sales through advertising and word-of-mouth etc. Remember the saying "he who is good with a hammer sees everything as a nail"? The truth is neither option is 100% right and a balance should be struck. A person who relies solely on going out and knocking on doors or making cold calls to make sales will still be doing the same thing day in, day out in 10 years time. On the other hand a person who relies on reactive sales alone could find themselves in trouble if the market goes quiet for a length of time and their old ways of bridging the gap no longer makes it happen for them.

If you find out what the "gap" is between you and your potential customers you have a much better idea of which approach you need to focus on more. Here are some examples of circumstances where the proactive approach (moving the customer closer to you) is preferable:

- You have no marketing budget. In which case you have little choice but to go out and find the customers and bring them to you.
- Your product or service is difficult to sell or is an intangible. For example people selling consultancy services on subjects such as marketing or health & safety.
- Your product or service is very expensive.
- The majority of your potential customers cannot be easily reached through advertising or affordable marketing methods.

Here are some examples of circumstances where the reactive approach (moving your product closer to the customer) is preferable :

- You don't have a dedicated sales person/team.
- You are selling a low cost product or service.
- Your potential customers can be easily reached and made aware of your product through specific forms of marketing.
- You can easily prove the value of your offering without a one-on-one sales pitch.

Whichever approach you are more inclined towards to bridge the customer gap you should be extremely careful to avoid a very common trap. This is to delegate the sales and marketing efforts of the business to someone else. Knowledge of marketing and sales is crucial to the success of your business and you cannot achieve this if you, as the business owner, are not the very best marketer and salesperson in your business. If you cannot sell or understand how to communicate the benefits of your business to customers then you cannot expect anybody else to do it for you. Delegating power of your marketing to an outside agency, a new employee or a consultant is a crucial mistake as you have handed over the keys to your own success to someone other than the person who has the greatest vested interest, passion and enthusiasm in what you do. You! You should seek advice if required and over time as your business grows you will naturally delegate some tasks to others. However whatever else happens in your business you should always be in a position to be master of your own success.



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