

Failing Forward Successfully

By: Debbie Allen

Can Mistakes Be Good For Your Business?

Hopefully you make a mistake now and again, because failure can actually be good for you and your business. If you haven't made any mistakes for a while, you may be playing it too close to your comfort zone and not stretching yourself far or fast enough to achieve high level goals. To aim high, you must accept some of the risks that go along with learning something new.

Risks come with the acceptance that you will make some mistakes along your journey, but you will want to avoid making costly mistakes or making the same mistake over and over again. Use good common business sense. Every business and every career has its share of challenges. You will constantly be tested in business as new challenges arise or as your business grows and expands.

You will always be challenged with new areas of your business that stretch you past your current abilities and expertise. It may be a big sale, the start of a new business, a new opportunity or an extremely difficult challenge. Yet all failures will help you learn more about your business and help you build your self-esteem at the same time.

Learn From Your Mistakes and Move On

Actually I don't even like the word mistake. I believe that mistakes are simply challenges in disguise. Realistically most of us don't get it right the first time around. Successful people make mistakes all the time, but the only difference is that most of the failures go unnoticed because they don't give up and keep on going.

Successful people make it look easy. It's easy looking in from the outside. We don't often notice or acknowledge their failures. Successful people evaluate their failures, come up with new solutions to the challenge and try again - this time more educated than the first. Successful people also don't allow the fear of failure to stop them from achieving their goals.

If you study the failure and challenges of business you will discover the ultimate success secrets of any enterprise. These are the key lessons an organisation learns as they grow, expand and compete in a changing marketplace.

If you want to create shamelessly fabulous success, study all the failures. Most highly successful people were not successful from the beginning, they had to struggle a little or a lot to reach their peak potential. Walt Disney was actually fired from his first job because he was told that he was not creative enough. Not creative enough? Luckily, he didn't listen to his clueless boss and trusted his own innovative ideas.

We all have a tendency to focus on success and fear failure when things don't go as planned. Don't be too hard on yourself if you feel that you are making too many mistakes to make it to the top. Hang in there and be patient. Once you overcome the challenge you won't have to do it again and you will be failing forward faster.

Success takes time just as it takes time for you to adjust and learn new skills. But, be aware that mistakes will continue to happen even after you have reached a high level of success. You will always need to be learning something new in business to stay innovative and on top of your game. So when you think you have it all figured out and have made all the mistakes you need to make to learn, something will challenge you again and test your confidence.

I've been an entrepreneur all of my adult life and I'm still making mistakes, and plan to keep making them. Once I have it all figured out I get bored. Making mistakes, turning them into challenges and then overcoming those obstacles in business is extremely rewarding. There is nothing that can challenge, motivate and build your confidence faster.

Mistakes and challenges are going to occur anyway, so the sooner you learn from them, the sooner you will become more successful in whatever you do. We tend to reach conclusions about success, but until success is compared with failures you don't truly understand the whole story of how business works.

Why Don't They Teach Failure In School?

Failures tend to disappear from business education curriculum? Information about business failures is often scarce or ignored completely, yet it is inevitable. On the other hand, information on successful companies and their success strategies is in generous supply.

Companies that pursue unsuccessful strategies either change their business strategies or they go out of business. A successful company is described as having used visionary management and innovative marketing strategies while a failing business is accused of poor business management and overall bad business skills. So why don't we teach future entrepreneurs more about failure? Wouldn't that save us a ton of money from mistakes that could have been avoided in the first place?

Can you imagine telling your banker to add an additional \$20,000 for the mistakes that you plan to make in your new business venture? They would think you were crazy. Yet that is exactly what is going to happen while you develop the business. You simply must make mistakes to see what works and does not work to attract new customers. It is necessary to make mistakes as any business grows. The reason why franchises have a larger success rate than independent company start-ups is because they have already made many of the mistakes and systemized the business around avoiding them in the future. For the most part, franchises come with proven success systems that were created out of learning from past mistakes.

Magnify Your Profits

By: Debbie Allen

Why is great marketing so important? Because when done well, it can magnify your income and profits dramatically! Wouldn't you like to make more money with the exact same time, effort and expense? Of course, well that is easy to do when you learn the strategies behind highly effective marketing. You don't have to spend more money on your marketing to make it work - just continue to understand it and get better and better at it. That is why I love marketing so much. It is challenging and it rewards you quickly when done well.

Here are some tips to help you improve and magnify your efforts.

DIVERSIFY YOUR DATABASE

Market to your core customer base and target client groups differently. Break down your database group into different sections or groupings. This way you will target the specific needs of those groups and make a stronger, more personalized connection.

BUILD TRUST AND CREDIBILITY

Offer an unconditional money-back guarantee for an extended period of time. Feature testimonials from your customers that feature the benefits of doing business with you that solved concerns or handled their problems.

PUT YOURSELF AT RISK

Take away any risk of your customer doing business with you. Make it a win-win situation and stand behind that offer.

THINK WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS MIND

You may be so close to your business everyday that you stop to think the way your customers think. When you begin to think from your customer's point of interest, you will begin to improve your marketing message in everything you do. Show them precisely how their lives will be better or easier by doing business with you. Tell them what actions to take and tell them when and why to take that action.

UPSELL

Would you like fries with that? Would you like to make that a value meal? Even the grocery store asks if you would like ice or stamps with your groceries these days. The post office as well has this down to a science. When you drop off mail at the counter they ask if you would like delivery confirmation, more stamps, etc. Remind your customers of other products and services with every sale. You are doing your customer a disservice if you don't offer them all the services or products that you feel may be of help to them.

Strategic Planning: Your Blueprint to Success

By: Debbie Allen

To become successful, you must first plan for your success. Strategic planning can be your blueprint to achieving your goals and planning for future growth. In addition, strategic planning can get you focused on your marketing approach and also help to build a supportive team of employees.

Strategic planning, which is a combination of strategic thinking and long-range planning, should not be entered into lightly. It requires considerable time and concentration from the members of the planning team. Strategic planning must be organized, communicated, and implemented systematically.

Who Leads the Meeting?

Although the owner of the business or general manager provides the leadership for the total planning process; it is highly desirable that an experienced planning facilitator guide these team meetings. This role must be carefully defined, and the right person selected to fulfill it. Preferably, someone from the management team should not fill it, even though some members may have the necessary skills. Each member of the team must be free to express a personal view and take a strong position on issues at hand.

The role of the facilitator is primarily one of process more than content. The process of planning is as important as the product. The process by which planning is carried out needs to promote open communication, trust, understanding, and belief. All of these are important ingredients in the whole people dimension of planning. People, not plans, produce results!

The Content of the Plan

A solid strategic planning framework and information base is the format from which decisions and judgments can be made. This includes detailed understanding of the dynamics in the industry and how it relates to your business. Other factors include; your competitive environment, customer base, strengths, weaknesses and opportunities of the company.

The facilitator assists and supports the team as a group and individually; by having them share concepts, techniques, and methods of selling to your customer. By guiding the process, the facilitator assures the airing of all relevant points of view and concern, and when appropriate, confronting and challenging individual members of the team. This is especially helpful when presented by someone who is likely to be more objective and outside of the team.

Involving the team

A strategic plan is a major communication vehicle to involve all members of the team and inform them to what is happening within your organization, as well as provide guidance to the personal and business goals of each individual.

Your employees probably represent the single most important group to bring into the meeting. It is important to get the word to them as quickly as possible about your future plans. Handled properly, this communication can be a powerful way to bring your employees together as a strong team.

Why you need strategic planning

With the growing competition, low unemployment rate and changes within the new century; you need to PLAN to become successful today. Success doesn't just happen while you go about your business day to day & unless you are extremely lucky. But even a lucky person can run into problems along the way without a plan for future growth.

Your employees will naturally become more effective when they know your plan for success. To know they are such an important part of a growing team is motivating. Strategic planning will help them to plan their own personal and business goals to support your efforts.

Do you want to grow your sales by 20% or more this year? This goal can be implemented into your structured plan and presented to your staff with support in the form of a bonus for their efforts on getting you to that goal. It is important to give them a reason to support your business growth; a new bonus system may be just the answer.

Prepare to invest the time and effort required, then precede with confidence that strategic planning will help shape your organization's future success.

Using Customers' Ideas for Your Strategic Growth

By: Debbie Allen

An effective way to gather information about your customer base is to gather customers' ideas during a well thought-out focus group. Your customers can help you in the strategy development process of your business. Listening to the results of a focus group will afford you rich insight into your customers' preferences, perceptions, attitudes, and ideas. Market research companies offer complete, turnkey packages that include selecting and inviting participants, developing surveys, moderating the group, and writing reports. Or you may organize a focus group yourself to keep costs to a minimum. Here's how to go about it.

Steps to Creating Your Focus Group

1. Select 20 or more participants for your focus group. Be sure to draw from a range of ages, sizes, tastes, etc. Take approximately half of the attendees from your regular clientele, one-fourth from newer clientele who have been doing business with you for one year or less, and one fourth from customers who no longer use your business. Keep in mind that only about 50 percent of the people you invite will attend, so send out twice as many invitations. Twelve to fifteen people with group diversity are a good size.

To ensure the diversity of your focus group, select customers that have done little or no business with your company and others that are repeat loyal customers. Take a few bargain shopper customers along with your best customers that care more about service and quality. Select customers from different generations as well from seniors and boomers to gen X and Y. If your client's age does not reach that far, diversify the age range as much as possible. The same goes for gender and race.

2. Send out invitations to the event. Include benefits to attend such as a nice lunch or dinner along with a gift certificate for your business or a special gift valued at around \$25. Also enclose a cover letter that advises prospective guests that the meeting will take approximately 90 minutes and that all information will be confidential. Let your focus group know that you will be implementing their valuable ideas, needs, and concerns to improve upon your business.

3. You may want to hold the function over lunch or dinner at a nice restaurant with a private dining area. Budget the cost as a marketing expense. Not only are you investing in your customers, you are telling them how much you appreciate their opinions. You are showing them that you value them as an important part your business. Think of your focus group expense as an investment in your target market. It will come back to you many times over.

4. Select a facilitator who has great communication skills and good working knowledge of your industry and the competition. The facilitator's ability to create a positive group dynamic is key to your success. Owners, managers, and store personnel should not be present, or the participants may not feel free to speak honestly. It may be most effective to have an owner or manager welcome guests and then turn the meeting over to the facilitator. Make it clear that you, the owner or manager, are not attending.

5. Create a list of questions for your facilitator. Be as specific as possible, but leave the questions open-ended.

Here are some examples:

- What products and/or services do you purchase?
- What services do you like and dislike?
- How can our customer service be improved?
- What can we do to make your overall shopping experience better?

- What makes you return to our business?
- Which of our competitors do you also patronize?
- How do you feel that we rate compared to the competition?
- If you do not shop at the competition, why do you shop with us instead?
- Do you refer your friends, relatives, and business associates to our business? If so, why?
- Is our location convenient for you?
- If we opened a second store, where would you suggest as a convenient location?
- What hours of operation are most convenient for you?

Have the facilitator ask these questions of the audience. Tape this part of the session if permitted by all attendees. You must inform them that you are taping the session. If one of the participants objects to being taped, have someone take details notes of the session.

6. As the facilitator leads the discussion he or she will take detailed notes on the customers' comments or even record the session. He or she will also compile the questionnaires, and combined with the notes, create a detailed report for you.

7. At the end of the meeting, come back into the room and thank the participants. Use this opportunity to suggest that they visit your business more often and refer others.

8. Most important of all examine the report, the notes, and the questionnaires and listen to the session. Really listen to what these customers are saying, then create an action plan based on these findings. Listening and responding to your customer base is an extremely effective way to grow your business.

Take action to implement the new ideas and changes within a matter of months. After improvements have been put into place, make follow-up phone calls to attendees. During your conversation tell them of your improvements. Thank them again for helping you focus your business more on their needs and improve your customer service. You will reap the rewards from your efforts by the continuous flow of referrals that happy customers send your way.

How Are We Doing?

Another way to find out what your customers think of your business is to compose a HOW ARE WE DOING questionnaire or postcard and leave it by your registration desk or check out counter. You could also include it in your next billing statement or group mailer. Include a pre-stamped return. If customers include their names and addresses be sure to acknowledge receipt of the card with a thank you. Give them a benefit for filling out the information, such as a free gift or inclusion in a drawing. Gifts could include dinner for two at a fine restaurant, a weekend trip for two, gift certificates for your business, or another highly valued coupon.

Ask key questions, and keep the whole thing short and simple.

- What do you like about us?
- What can we do better?
- What products or services are of interest to you?
- Tell us about your latest experience in our business.

Each individual customer's perception of your business will be a little different. Let them know how much you value their opinions and appreciate their business.

What's the Mystery?

Mystery shopping and evaluation programs are offered by a number of companies to study how your business is perceived to the public. An anonymous shopper comes into your business and evaluates your image and customer service. A mystery shopper is experienced in what to look for that most affects your customers' experience.

Mystery shopping and evaluation programs can help you focus on your customer satisfaction goals. Their findings can uncover valuable information about your customers' experiences when they visit

your business. You can also evaluate your staff and their effectiveness. You will find mystery shoppers or evaluators in your area's Yellow Pages.

Mystery shopping has additional benefits for you as a staff manager. When you get your evaluation, be sure to reward an employee who performed well in the shop. A small bonus, gift certificate, or special lunch will show your appreciation and keep them motivated. For those employees who showed room for improvement, use the shop reports as an opportunity for you to help them improve their customer service. The great thing about shops is that the criticism does not come from you but from an outside and unknown source. You are just helping them to get better.

Times Have Changed!

"If you limit your choices only to what seems possible or reasonable, you disconnect yourself from what you truly want, and all that is left is a compromise." ~ Robert Fritz

Customers love businesses that take the time to listen to them and to show they care. Unfortunately for customers, there are so few out there these days. There is no better way to show you care than to implement customers' ideas on improving your service. Be open-minded to making the changes and services that your customers value even if they seem unreasonable or impossible to accomplish. Don't ever compromise your service by limiting yourself to your own internal business ideas. You don't have all the answers on how to improve your business. Customers are out there just waiting to be asked.

How to Grow Your Business Through Networking

By: Debbie Allen

One smart business owner can do a lot to make a business successful. But, put that together with other great business minds all sharing ideas and brainstorming & now you have & Networking Dynamics! Brainstorming and networking with other creative people is a powerful tool to create Success in your business. You can't just go it alone in this competitive marketplace. You need the help and knowledge of other successful people to stay on top.

Networking is not an option to becoming successful & it is a Necessity! How can you possibly keep up to date and compete with the stiff competition without having that edge of additional knowledge and shared information? You can't!

Wouldn't you like to know how other business owners keep their staff happy and motivated? Wouldn't you like to know how they handle their day-to-day problems and challenges? Sure you would, and all you have to do is ASK!

There is so much to learn, and we cannot do it all by ourselves. We need to share and network all the time. There are opportunities out there just waiting for you and all you have to do is to start looking for them. Every time you attend a tradeshow, convention or seminar those opportunities await you.

You can start by meeting other business owners during convention breaks and talk to everyone everywhere you go about your business. Don't be shy, introduce yourself and start sharing. When you take the time to share, so will they. Exchange business cards and keep in touch with your new business friends. When you speak with other business owners that are not in your direct competition you can share and learn everything about one another's business.

Networking is what made my business so successful. That is why I believe in it so strongly. When I opened my first retail store over 15 years ago, I had no knowledge of the industry. I just jumped in with both feet & wading through the trails and tribulations by myself. Until one day I was invited into a focused networking group of retailers. This focus group helped to create such incredible growth within my retail business.

My business increased over ten times in a short three-year period. I could not have done that without the help and support of this networking group. You can also create this type of opportunity for yourself. Meet with them on a regular basis and share your invaluable information. You will be amazed at how fast this will grow your business!

The Great Benefits of Networking

- To create a networking alliance of shared successes
- Meet new people and develop new friendships
- Share ideas, marketing strategies and challenges with others from the same industry
- Know that you are not alone with your concerns and problems
- Refer people to other businesses / they will return the favor
- Meet seminar leaders that can give you new insight and solutions to help your business grow
- Brainstorming ideas will increase your creativity and business effectiveness

Networking Skills

- Focus on getting to know others first.
- Create a 30 second commercial about your business.

- Think about what makes your business unique. Work on your commercial and practice it until you really have it down with enthusiasm.
- Learn how to remember names by focusing on that person only.
- Think about and relate that person's name instantly.
- Make good eye contact.
- The eyes are the most descriptive of all body parts. People will know if you are sincere, honest and interested in them.
- Have enthusiasm and share as much as you can.
- Send a hand written note to every new associate you meet.
- Take a good, long look at your business card as if you have never looked at it before. Does your card's image and logo reflect your business properly? Does your business card make your business look exciting and inviting to new prospective customers?

7 Ways to Boost Your Business Image

By: Debbie Allen

1. See Your Business Through Your Customers Eyes.

Keep a strong focus on your customer base. Pay close attention to their needs and concerns. Study the diversity of different genders and generations. One size sales and service no longer works in the marketplace.

2. Create A Unique Selling Proposition.

Your logo, professional image and catch phrase must be unique and strongly recognizable. Tell prospective customers why they should do business with you instead of your competition. Promote benefits in all your marketing materials. What makes your business stand out? What is the most unique and beneficial thing you offer your customers? When you discover that you will discover your Unique Selling Proposition.

3. Choose your overall image and remain consistent.

All of your marketing materials should feature the same professionally designed logo, colors, paper stock, branded image, etc.

4. Sweat the small stuff.

Pay attention to the details of your overall business image. Customers notice and judge you and your business at first glance. They decide to do business with you or move on to your competition quickly from their first impression.

5. Ask for and use testimonials.

Third party testimonials are powerful. Prospective clients want to know that they can trust you and have made the right decision to do business with you and your company. Let your shameless fans speak the praise of your organization.

6. Improve your business card.

This is a great place to start. While presenting to audiences around the world I see thousands of poorly designed business cards. This may be the first image you present of your business. If you are making mistakes on your business card, then you are most likely making many more mistakes with your marketing efforts.

See how your business card ranks.

Take my free business card quiz and rank your card online at

http://debbieallen.com/international_business_image.htm#BusinessCard

7. Hire professionals that can bring out your BEST.

You can't do it all great if you are trying to do it all yourself. Believe me, you are not saving money by printing your own business cards, designing your own Website and printing your own brochures. Unless that is what you do for a living. If not, don't get cheap with your image. Cheap will cost you BIG time in the long run. Your professionalism, business image, success and profits are at stake!