

How To Choose The Business That's Right For You

By Tim Knox

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Q: I really want to start my own business, but I have no idea what business would be best suited for me. I'm also eager to get started, but I don't want to pick the wrong business just because I'm impatient. How should I go about deciding what business would be best for me?
-- Samuel J.

A: Before I answer your question, Samuel, I want you to reach around and pat yourself on the back for not letting your eagerness push you into making a wrong decision. All too often we entrepreneurs tend to let our impatience drive us to make decisions that we later regret. In business such haste can be very costly, indeed.

I always compare starting a business to jumping into a pool of freezing water. There are typically two types of entrepreneurs who take the plunge.

The first are the "Toe Testers." These are those cautious folks who just stick their big toe in the pool to gauge the temperature of the water. It is for these careful entrepreneurs that the phrase "testing the waters" was coined. Toe Testers enter the business pool slowly, a little bit at a time. The lesson to be learned from Toe Testers is to start slowly and don't feel like you have to wade in too fast. Ease into the business pool gradually to make sure it's right for you. Remember, many entrepreneurs realize that the business world is not right for them only after they are in it up to their necks. And that's when the term "sink or swim" takes on a whole new meaning.

The next type of entrepreneur is the "High Diver." These are those fearless souls who climb the

ladder and dive into the business pool head first without worrying about the depth of the water or the dangers that lurk beneath the surface. It is for these entrepreneurs that the phrase "damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead" was coined. Quite often these entrepreneurial daredevils find themselves drowning in unknown waters or end up with their heads buried in the bottom of the pool.

Both types of entrepreneurs may find success, depending on how well equipped they are to handle the water they are diving into. Here are a few ideas to help better prepare you for the plunge.

Let your experience be your guide.

Start with what you know. If you have spent twenty years working as an accountant or you love to build wooden toy trains as a hobby, consider how you can take that experience and turn it into a successful business. You might also find a great business idea right under your nose. Look around your workplace. Do you see needs that are going unmet or can you think of a better way of doing something? If so, you might have the seed for a profitable business.

Do what you love and enjoy what you do.

I can't emphasize this enough. Many people start a business for the wrong reason: to get rich. While it is true that many millionaires in this country made their fortunes from their own business ventures, that should not be your sole motivation for starting a business. If you don't enjoy what you do, you will not be successful, at least not from a mental point of view. Sure, the monetary rewards can be tremendous, but the mental anguish of working in a business you don't enjoy is a high price to pay. I talk to entrepreneurs all the time who are running successful businesses, but are so unhappy as a result that they literally make themselves sick. If you don't enjoy what you do the business will become a chore, not a joy.

Don't reinvent the wheel, just make it better.

Many first time entrepreneurs assume that they have to come up with a new business idea to be successful. That simply is not true. Most successful businesses are born not of innovation, but of necessity. Instead of trying to come up with an idea that changes the world, take a look at the world around you and see where there might be a void that needs filling or a business concept that needs improvement.

Many successful businesses have been built by taking a traditional business and making it better. Domino's Pizza was certainly not the first to offer home delivery of pizza, but they were the first to guarantee it would be delivered piping hot to your door in 30 minutes or less. Amazon.com was not the first company to sell books, but they were one of the first that would let you buy books from the comfort of your own home while sitting in your underwear.

Focus on a niche.

Many businesses have gone broke trying to be all things to all people. The ability to offer a gazillion products under one roof is all well and good for Wal-Mart, but not for most new small businesses. Try to identify a niche that you would enjoy working in and think about starting a business therein. If you love to work outdoors, consider starting a landscaping business. If you enjoy working with numbers, think about becoming an accountant or CPA. When's the last time you had your gardener do your taxes? You get the idea. Focus on a niche and become an expert in your field.

A franchise might be an option.

Many new entrepreneurs consider buying a franchise operation instead of starting a business from scratch. Franchises are a good way to jumpstart the process because they have already done much of the hard work for you. They have proven the business model, established guidelines for running the business, spent millions of dollars on establishing the brand, etc. Buying a franchise is typically a very expensive and involved process that is beyond the scope of this article. The best

thumbnail of advice I can give you is to thoroughly investigate the franchisor and the opportunity, use your own attorney to do the deal, and read the fine print in the franchise agreement.

It's hard to swim in a crowded pool.

If the business pool is already filled with other companies doing the same thing you want do, chances are you will fail in the face of established competition. To succeed in such a crowded pool you will have to do something to stand out from the crowd (and I don't mean greeting customers while wearing a bright red Speedo). If you can't quickly and easily differentiate yourself from a large group of competitors, you're better off choosing another business.

Above all, take your time.

Whatever business you choose to start, I encourage you to take the time required to make an informed, intelligent decision. Think about starting part time while you still have your current job (and income) to fall back on. Talk to friends and associates who use the product or service you will provide to see if they would consider become paying customers.

Remember, in business you can end up swimming in success or sinking in failure. The key to your success might just lie in the sensitivity of your big toe.

Here's to your success.

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Small Business Q&A is written by veteran entrepreneur and syndicated columnist, Tim Knox. Tim serves as the president and CEO of three successful technology companies: B2Secure Inc., a Web-based hiring management software company; Digital Graphiti Inc., a software development company; and Sidebar Systems, a company that creates-cutting edge convergence software for broadcast media outlets. Tim is also the founder of OnlineProfits4U.com, an ebusiness dedicated to the success of online entrepreneurs.

Tim is also the Ebusiness Startup and Design Expert for Entrepreneur.com, the website of the national publication Entrepreneur Magazine.

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