

The Entrepreneurial Wisdom of Cats

by
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If you think cats are nothing more than adorable and sometimes spoiled family pets, think again. They're also some of the greatest business teachers around. In fact, those successful entrepreneurs who seem to "have it all" often share some common characteristics with our feline friends.

Whether you currently own your own home-based business or are still searching for your "purr-fect" opportunity, take heed to a cat's advice. It could pay off financially, emotionally, developmentally and even spiritually. Here are the three main lessons any entrepreneur can benefit from.

1. Do What Comes Naturally

Cats don't worry about what others think. Part of their considerable charm is their "cattitude." They delight in their own independence. So should you delight in yours. Pick a home business that suits you and allows you to express your talents.

What do you love doing that others might find boring? Undesirable? Unique? What draws your attention? What are you passionate about? If you don't know, try asking yourself, "What makes me mad?" The answer will give you clues about what gets you excited. The flip side of anger often tells you what you care about. Perhaps the most telling question of all is, "If success were assured, what would you do in life?" In other words, if you put aside perceived limitations, what would your dream business really be?

In her book, *Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow*, Marsha Sinetar tells the true story of a man who loves attending baseball games. At first he's baffled by how to convert this passion into a thriving business. Then he observes that the fans are having difficulty getting to the ballpark and finding parking. So he starts a van service and gets to watch all the games while earning a living. And because he's an avid fan, he provides little extras for his customers that only someone who stays close would see. As a result, his business grows.

The same principle holds true in an established home business. Since home business owners are often solo entrepreneurs, they are forced to handle all the business tasks themselves--from accounting and prospecting to customer service and mailroom duties. In order to cut costs, this work overload is at first a necessity; however, as the business gets busier and more established, some entrepreneurs completely stop doing the things they enjoy and that made them successful. Instead of outsourcing responsibilities or hiring an operations person to handle day to day internal functions, many business owners bog themselves down with tasks they dislike. This is a road to business burn-out.

Once your home business is pulling the necessary profits, consider hiring an assistant to take over the tasks you dislike. That way you can focus on the business building aspects you enjoy, like prospecting and advertising, and take your home business to the next level.

2. Be Curious and Find the Right Niche

Cats prowl for opportunity. They explore their territory by sight and scent. Cats squeeze into nooks and crannies other creatures wouldn't consider like drawers, bookcases and shopping bags. They use conventional things unconventionally. So do

successful entrepreneurs. Take your products or services and explore old ground as if it were new.

What are some growth opportunities you see in your business? What do your customers want that they aren't receiving? What are some ideas to improve your products or services that your customers haven't even thought of yet?

As you read these questions, you may be thinking, "This costs money!" Not always. Think how you can use your current resources creatively. Many times you can create extra value for your products or service simply by offering your customers some free information, such as a self-published booklet or report. Find out what your customers want and then creatively make it available to them.

Often, concern or fear keeps people from brainstorming and thinking up new, creative ideas. Wonderful ideas don't surface because self-imposed barriers halt the creative process. Suspend judgment for a moment and ask yourself, "If resources were not an issue, what could I offer to deliver a unique mix of value to my customers?"

One of the main reasons entrepreneurs are attracted to having their own business is the opportunity to imprint their style. Successful entrepreneurs are often creative and usually curious. They combine ideas or structures that already exist in a new way. Take the mega-company 1-800-FLOWERS as an example.

For long distance floral delivery, FTD and its participating local florists were the only game in town. You never really knew what your gift arrangement would look like, and the recipient would often be reluctant to say anything negative. Then one day someone said, "Why not look at distributing flowers in a whole new way? Why not show pictures of exactly what the floral arrangements look like and let people order direct?"

Offering a unique mix of consistency and convenience to its customers, 1-800-FLOWERS was born.

Another way home business owners can come up with new ideas is by booting up their computers. Technology has made it possible for small businesses to track customer demographics and conduct advanced customer research. You can go "data mining" by looking at routine data found in your accounting program, contact-management files and other sources. Analyze all the information you currently have about your customer base to learn more about them and what their needs are.

3. Make the Leap

Dogs trot. Cats leap. Cats gauge the distance they want to cross then strategically position themselves to spring with confidence. They are fearless.

Fear of failure can keep even the most talented people from leaping to new heights and fulfilling their dreams. Once you discover a natural direction for yourself and find the right niche, develop your plan. See yourself succeeding and take the plunge. Even if at first cats miss their mark, they land on all fours, ready to leap again. So can you.

What do you want to do next that presents the greatest challenge? What keeps you from leaping? Whether it's to start a home business or to reinvent the one you're in, moving to a new height isn't usually easy. Past experiences and anticipated problems can stand in the way of making a commitment.

If I had to isolate one variable that separates successful entrepreneurs from their counterparts, it's commitment. Commitment frees you to focus. Commitment breeds confidence, in yourself and in what you're doing.

One way to foster commitment to your new or existing home business is to make specific goals and commit them to paper. While saying your goals to yourself and keeping them in mind are a good start, writing them on paper is the first major step to reaching the next level.

Writing your goals holds you accountable. They're no longer just a mental plan; they're written out as your road-map to success. But don't let accountability hold you back. Just like anything in life, your goals should be flexible and open to change. As your business grows and develops, so too will your goals. If you miss your mark, you'll simply refocus your goal and leap again.

These are just a few ways cats and successful entrepreneurs cross paths. Observe what you love. Allow ambiguity and suspend judgment as you look at yourself, your motivations, and your vision for the future. Take time to be curious and explore your environment. Examine new niches and see old ground from a new slant. Get your plan in place, take a deep breath . . . then make the leap!

Mary Hessler Key, Ph.D. helps people and organizations grow. She is the author of ***The Entrepreneurial Cat: 13 Ways to Transform Your Work Life***. To order, call 1-800-929-2929. For more information, visit www.marykeyassociates.com or call 813-831-9500.