

What Entrepreneurs Can Learn from Cats

- **Technology offers new options to ferret out more information than ever before.**
- **Cats delight in their own independence, and so should you in yours**

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In my work as a consultant I have noticed that successful entrepreneurs who have created balanced lives share some common traits with cats. Whether you own your own business, you're planning to start or buy one, or if you just want to be more proactive in your career life, take some unsolicited advice from our feline friends. It could pay off financially, emotionally, developmentally and even spiritually. Here are just a few of the similarities I have observed.

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 business or career 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 I do in life?" In other words, if you put aside perceived limitations, what would your dream career really be?

In her book "Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow," Marsha Sinetar tells the true story of a man who loves watching baseball games live. 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 he earns a living. Because he's an avid fan, he provides extras for his customers that only someone who stays close would see. His business grows.

The same principle is true in an established organization. So often entrepreneurs stop doing the things that made them successful and that they enjoy, such as meeting customers or planning strategy. Instead of outsourcing responsibilities like accounting and recruiting (pick yours), or hiring an operations person to handle day-to-day internal functions, many business owners bog themselves down with tasks they dislike. Doug Mellinger, CEO and founder of PRT Group, has been billed as the next Bill Gates. PRT helps companies develop technology solutions to their business problems. The company was started in 1989 and grew to \$62 million in sales in 1997. In order to solve the problem of finding great programmers and avoiding the red tape in foreign countries, Mellinger decided to create a "country" for programmers on the island of Barbados.

His innovative approach resulted in a 21st century high -tech community where workers, customers, capital and infrastructure have all been imported. When asked about his unconventional methods and how he accomplished this, Mellinger commented "I never ask how can I do it, but who can do it?" Part of doing what comes naturally in business is finding "who" can get things done that don't necessarily play to your strengths.

FIND OPPORTUNITIES

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, such as 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 opportunities you see in your work environment? 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 might be saying, "This costs money!" Concern or fear keeps people from brainstorming. Wonderful ideas don't surface because self-imposed barriers arrest the creative process.

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 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 that small business owners can view old things as if they were new is by booting up their computers. Technology has made it possible for small businesses to track customer demographics and conduct advanced customer research that only large companies could once do. You can go "data mining" by looking at routine data found in your accounting program, contact-management files and other sources. High-powered desktop technology and the latest software packages offer new options to ferret out information.

Take 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 they miss their mark, cats land on all fours, ready to jump again.

COMMITMENT COUNTS

What do you want to do next that presents you with the greatest challenge? What keeps you from leaping? Whether it's to start a business or to reinvent the one you are 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 breeds confidence, in yourself and in what you're doing. Commitment also frees you to focus.

IBM has a great ad about an entrepreneur named Martha Diaz Aszekenazy. Aszekenazy loves restoring things and decided to start a construction business in Los Angeles that restores and renovates statues and landmarks. As you can imagine, the construction business in L.A. is pretty competitive. Aszekenazy believed in herself and developed customized construction project software with IBM's support. This technology gave her company a competitive edge, and she "leveled the playing field."

Sometimes reinventing yourself or starting over again can be much more difficult. Robert Deutsch, founder of General Physics Corp., is a man who bounced back in the twilight years of his life. At the age of 63, Deutsch was ousted from the company he started and grew to more than \$115 million in annual sales. Instead of taking his "retirement package" in silence, he let the public know he'd been fired and wasn't happy about it.

Within a month, Deutsch used the money he'd made to fund a technical training business. Started in 1988, RWD Technologies retrains front-line workers to use developing technology in the workplace. Deutsch noticed the frustration corporate management experienced when it invested in new technology and employees didn't know how to use it. He saw the possibilities for productivity gains. He had always been a champion of the front-line worker. How many of us would make another leap at 63?

In summary, it's important to start inside and work out. Observe what you love. Allow ambiguity and suspend judgment as you look at yourself, your motivations, and your vision for success.