

9 Key Skills to Thrive in Small Business

Proven, learnable skills,
with real case-studies,
so you can thrive in your business,
doing what you love.

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For small business owners.
Keep organising.
Keep creating.
Keep going.

INTRODUCTION

In this document, I'm outlining the **nine major skills that allow successful small business owners to thrive doing work they're proud of, for people they love.**

With each skill, I've highlighted a specific business, with insights directly from the owner, so you can see how they've applied the skill.

So what do we mean by "thrive?"

Some of these businesses are small lifestyle businesses. Some are turning over high six figures or even seven figures, with a full time staff and team.

However, while business size, structure and industry varies, we see these same themes over and over.

These are skills. They aren't tactics. And they aren't talents either. They aren't the latest marketing trend, or social media hashtag, and they aren't things that the owner was "born" with either. These business owners aren't lucky, or gifted, they've simply worked over time.

The case studies are based on specific interviews or conversations. I'm grateful to have worked with some of these businesses as coaching clients, and others are people or businesses I look up to, both locally, and abroad.

HOW TO USE THE RESOURCE

I'd suggest reading the whole resource, then going back through each skill. Click out to go deeper into the podcast or resource that I point to with each business owner if it resonates.

From there, tackle the development questions I've created for each skill.

Finally, reach out to the business owner! Let them know what you loved, what you weren't sure on, or reach out to me directly if you need some direction.

Let's dive into the 9 learnable skills you need to go full time in your business, doing what you love...

DISCLAIMER

Before we kick off, a quick word of warning.

If you have a business or idea, you will **not** be able to grow it just by reading this, or any other document or book. You need to take action.

Furthermore, these strategic skills have come from interviewing dozens (if not hundreds) of small business owners who have patiently done the work. You won't see tactics or shortcuts here.

This doesn't mean that tactics aren't useful, it just means they are different than strategic skills.

Finally, studying and even practicing these skills is no guarantee of business results. Providing value to the market is a key driver for business growth, not a skill written in a book. Having said that, here I'm showing you what we see working, time and time again.

Let's dive in...

SKILL 1: BIAS FOR ACTION/ORGANISING

Full disclosure, the term “Bias for Action” is stolen directly from Tom Peters. In the early 80’s Tom wrote In Search of Excellence, where he highlighted Bias for Action as the “big thing” that he saw winning companies have in common.

Well, It’s 2020, and even over here in small biz (he was in organisations and large companies), things haven’t changed. Not really a surprise.

So what is bias for action?

Well, as it sounds, it’s a bias to take action, rather than think about things, or talk about them.

It means that rather than spending more time reading, thinking, researching, questioning, or consuming, we take action. Quickly. Sure, obvious you might say.

But there’s more to it. We often don’t know what’s going to work, and what isn’t going to work. And because this can be scary, a bias for action doesn’t come naturally for most. **Having a bias for action is based on the fact that the result of whatever we want to do is only clear *once the product or idea has been tested by the market.***

Let’s go over that again. In small business, a lot of stuff you do won’t really work. Things are going to fail. Yes, even with good strategy. Even if you have a template from someone else...

So in a sense, the trick with a bias for action is to realise that it’s a numbers game. If we move forward on ten ideas, 4 might work, 3 might be flat, and 3 might fail. **But this leads to a higher success rate overall, because at the end of the day, we’ve done more.**

Over time having a bias for action leads to greater success. Not only from more successes, but the action in itself creates learning which leads to a positive outcome.

Come up with the idea, build it, test it, move quickly.

CASE STUDY - AIMEE TAWHAI

Aimee Tawhai is a kiwi based in Melbourne, Australia. In 2018 she launched her most recent version of The ALTR Project, a software company that allows gym owners, trainers and coaches to optimise their exercise programming for clients. It offers more flexibility and options through using logic and algorithms.

Aimee saw a need in the market, and created the first generation of ALTR herself in excel using algorithms. **As she developed ALTR, she was head of sales, client relationships, development, testing... Everything.** She saw what needed to be done, and did it.

“Everything was just me. Just reaching out to people and not being scared to say “Hey just try my tool, see if you like it.” I would have Skype calls with every single early person. Those would be four in the morning, or eleven at night. I was very involved.” - Aimee Tawhai

WAIT, THERE'S MORE

For Aimee, the software project ALTR isn't the only thing...

Aimee also is the founder and owner of her own thriving community gym CrossFit Project Bayside, in Moorabbin, Victoria, which she originally decided to build because she realised the need for a central hub to also host ALTR marketing or demo seminars.

When Aimee built the gym, she had a six week window to do it. She got the job done in 9 days.

“I had ALTR, and I needed a place to host seminars and showcase my product. I essentially built Bayside... It was meant to be done in six weeks, and it was done in nine days. Completely transformed.”

A BIAS FOR ACTION TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES

2020 was a tough year for gyms. There were a bunch of mandatory closures nationwide, with Melbourne seeing the worst of it. For around seven months, gyms were forced to close, shift online, pivot services, and change their way of doing business in order to stay alive. A lot of gyms stopped trading, or closed altogether.

Aimee's approach was different. She had her finger on the pulse of any new government mandates, and was acting accordingly.

“Within 24 hours of a close-down announcement, I had everything sorted. We had different membership options, all of the equipment was given out, we completely went online.”

*Any time that there was a change in restrictions or something new, **it was a 12 hour turnaround, and we would have a full plan** - just ready.”*

Aimee wasn't coming up with groundbreaking strategies or the “perfect” idea, she was identifying what needed to be done, and taking action.

When the customers, or members of the gym started to see this level of leadership, they realised they were in great hands. They could trust Aimee and the team, and so this helped maintain member numbers and revenue going forward.

Throughout the entire challenge, Aimee and her team kept pushing, even though times were tough.

“When there was talk of a third lockdown, the response we had from members was that people weren't scared, they could put their faith in me, they didn't need to pause their membership. That was some good feedback to get.”

DEVELOPING A BIAS FOR ACTION

When you hear Aimee speak, you can pick up this energy. But this tendency to leap into forward motion can take effort and time to develop.

When you think about it, **it's a way of seeing the world, understanding “Hey, I can do something here. Now.”**

It means we need to look at our habitual way of being, and shift it towards action. This isn't normal for everyone, and can be a challenge to learn, which also makes it an edge.

In a world of overconsumption and overthinking, this is a huge assist for small business, and we can always work on developing a stronger bias for action.

[Listen to a longer conversation with Aimee here.](#) (Spotify link, also available on iTunes)

Let's take a look at some development questions:

BIAS FOR ACTION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you prefer to research, to learn, or to act? What does the sequence (and time) look like typically? Without judgement, what does your default pattern look like?

2. How do you feel when something works? How do you feel when something doesn't work? Does this impact your speed or action afterwards?

3. Do the people around you have a bias for action? Do they get stuck in consumption? Who can you surround yourself with that moves fast? What can you learn from them?

4. Finally, how might a bias for action help you with your business or goals?

SKILL 2: VALUE AS A NORTH STAR

“You can’t play the old rules anymore, the rules have changed.” - Dain Walker.

Dain walker has put up around 400 posts on instagram. Starting from effectively zero, he’s found a following (at the time of writing) of 180k people who eagerly await his work each day. He’s also created a seven figure marketing consultancy from this.

For business owners in 2020, creating content can be a huge value add. When done well, this puts you in contact with the people you want to serve, **and in a position to help them on the journey that they’re making.**

But content creation and social media can be a minefield. For the average business owner, trying to understand how to start, where to start, and how to keep going is common.

It’s one thing to set up an insta account. It’s another to consistently bring value to an audience that cares and wants to follow your journey.

Here we talk about the skill of setting “Value” as a north star to help you build a business that thrives.

WHAT IS CONTENT?

If you’re reading this, you’re familiar with the stuff that fills up a Facebook or instagram feed. Maybe you subscribe to a few weekly emails. That’s content. There’s a big mix there, so let’s make a distinction get clearer.

Noisey Content: is the lists, shock headlines, cat videos, viral videos, advertisements and general entertainment. This is where most businesses go first when they think about creating content.

Helpful Content: In the words of storytelling master Bernadette Jiwa, “content shouldn’t feel like content.” She’s talking about insights, assertions, stories and thoughts. When we read content with a small “c,” it doesn’t *feel* like we’re reading content. It feels much more like an interesting conversation with the *human* behind the business.

Here we’re talking about helpful content (rather than junk, spam, or viral attempts).

As a business, creating content can help you engage with your clients, as well as the people you want to serve. Content that resonates allows you to build trust and attention, and connect with your audience at a deeper level. Content can be in a written format, in a video, or audio.

YOU NEED TO COLLABORATE

*"If you look at the gym community they don't collaborate. It's all competition. **The design community (for example) is extremely collaborative.** They all partner with each other... They'll all share and build each other up. It's like a massive cluster of people that are on the same mission, and they'll all collectively work with each other." - Dain Walker*

It's very difficult to gain any traction, or rise up as a content creator (or even be noticed for your content as a business) if you're a lone wolf. You need to interact if you want to get the most out of it.

You're interacting with humans, so thinking like you are part of a community is important before you even begin.

VALUE AS A NORTH STAR

One of the words that you'll keep hearing Dain talk about is "value." Sounds great, but what does he mean?

Putting "value" first shifts us into the shoes of the people in the audience.

Value can take a number of forms

1. **Educational value** - This helps to educate the audience, maybe a new way to solve a problem, or understand a helpful concept or topic.
2. **Entertainment value** - Not my strength personally. This could be music, humour, or other forms of entertainment. It creates "value" for the audience in that it entertains them.
3. **Meaning or context** - We can't always provide educational or entertainment value, but we can usually tell stories, give context, or create meaning for the audience. This can evoke an emotion that brings value.

*"I think people are getting stuck because they are thinking of the result. They're like "What result do I want? How can I get it? Oh, OK, I see I need to give value... Let me try to figure out how to give some value." **But value isn't the north star, the result is their north star. That's not going to take you down the right path.**"*

As a business, we need to think about value from the very beginning. Not engagement, subscribers, or followers, but value for the people we serve. **This needs to be the north star.**

Who are we creating this content for? What is the change we want to make, or how can this help them?

“Focusing on the growth is never going to get growth. Focusing on projecting value into the market is going to get eyeballs on your content, and people naturally going to follow and engage with you.”

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

“There’s been days where... I’ve had over 800 direct messages come in to me in a day. I’ve pretty much sat on a chair for three days, messaging people back. But those 800 people become fans. So any time I’m going to post anything, they are more likely to engage... The deeper value is there’s a relationship.”

While large companies aren’t really able to create meaningful relationships with all of their audience, you can.

You can reply to messages, engage in other people’s work, or ask people questions that can open a conversation.

We’ve already covered the importance of relationships in business, and online it’s exactly the same. As you create content, you’re not just putting it out “to the internet,” you’re really creating for specific people who have chosen to follow your work, many of whom would love to hear from you more regularly.

CONSISTENCY AND PERSISTENCE

It’s important to be consistent when creating value with your content. This gives you a chance to build a consistent brand over time.

“If you were to look at your content... does it line up? When people land on your page, they want to see unity, they want to see depth. They want to see you really good at one particular thing. If you can get really good, at one thing, and then add a second layer to it...”

[Listen to a longer conversation with Dain here](#) (Spotify link. Also available on iTunes)

Let’s take a look at some development questions to build on the idea of putting value first in your content.

CREATING MORE VALUE:

1. What kind of work do you do and who do you do it for?

2. What's important to these people? What are their challenges? What are their wants and needs? Specific!

3. Can you get an "audit?" Can you ask a friend to let you know if your work is clear? Does it seem valuable? What about on your social platforms? What do they say?

SKILL 3: LEADERS CREATE LEADERS

“We know who we want to work with. And it’s not to do with capacity or ability. It’s their willingness to come forward and do the work. Step into the environment, contribute from a place of love. Show up and lean in, and do the work too.” - Vik Hawksley

Vik and his partner Sarah run Anatomy in Motion, a strength and movement facility in North Sydney, with a focus on helping individuals build stronger bodies and minds through their training approaches.

When you walk into the small space, if a class is in session, you’ll notice something different. **People are paired up, and helping each other.** Not just helping, but *coaching*. Holding each other accountable, offering assistance and giving feedback. This is part of their approach. **This is a part of their culture.**

Vik and Sarah don’t just help people get stronger or more flexible, they’re helping them become leaders.

CREATING SELF SUFFICIENCY

One thing that can limit small biz growth is when customers find it hard to talk about their experience. The first question is, do they have the courage?

Do they have the self-sufficiency to stand up to a friend who has no idea about this business and say “hey, I think you might really love this place!”

It turns out, self-sufficiency can be built. When we see businesses or tribes that thrive, we see three things:

1. **A strong level of lateral connection inside the tribe.** People feel seen by each other and feel like they belong to something.
2. **People are elevated as leaders.** They’re given a platform to teach others, share insights or to showcase their results, and because they have a platform, they can get their own “followers” (no, this isn’t just about social media, this is offline as well - primarily!)
3. This sense of belonging *and* this sense of self sufficiency through being elevated as a leader means they can talk about the experience with others.

CREATING GREATER TRANSFORMATION

There's a café in Melbourne called Aunty Pegg's, that only serves black coffee. But even if you don't like an espresso or long black, if you're open to something new, the staff can help educate you on their latest single origin, and why they do what they do.

If you're on board with the transformation, you'll leave with a higher level of understanding about the coffee process, and what good black coffee is all about.

A customer might first go to a business or service to solve a problem. But they come back because of how it makes them feel.

Evoking the feeling of "growth" or transformation with a customer, is often one of the most powerful things we can do in business.

At AIM, when Vik educates his clients to be more coach-like, he's not just dishing up the latest exercise trend, he's empowering them to understand more about the body, how to move better and even **how they can take this into the world and help others.**

That feeling of transformation not only becomes a reason to come back, but it's also fuel for conversation.

Through creating leaders who are more educated about the work that you do, you're helping them talk about the work that you do. This is a powerful way to grow your business.

*"Our whole method is designed around educating an individual. It's not based on following certain protocols. It's understanding what the person needs and wants. **Then going OK cool, how do we educate that one person? How do they take information on? Is this too much? Is this too little? Is it too hard? Is it too easy? All of this gets blended in.**"*

This concept of educating and creating leaders isn't for everyone. It takes effort, but it's a powerful tool to help you differentiate as a business. Whether you have a café, a photography business, or sell flowers, **how can you help to further educate the people you serve?**

How can you help the person in front of you become a leader in their own life?

What feeling or experience can you give them so they want to talk about your work, in a way that makes them proud?

[Listen to a longer conversation with Vik here.](#) (Spotify link. Also available on iTunes)

Let's take a look at some key development questions that can help you create leaders

CREATING LEADERS QUESTIONS:

1. What is the problem that you solve in your business, or the transformation that you make *beyond* the thing that you do (beyond the “utility” - how do you make people feel? How does it affect their life?)

2. How can you help educate or transform the people that you serve in this area? Are there challenges that you could give them? Are there ways you could teach them? (This might even feel like industry knowledge)

3. If there's nothing clear *within* the service that you do, maybe you could elevate them as leaders in another area? A charity event and get them involved? A talk at the local school and tell stories about some of my best customers or clients?

SKILL 4: THE “ZAG” (CARVING YOUR OWN PATH)

“When they Zig, you Zag” - Marty Neumeier

“Zag” was a term coined by branding godfather Marty Neumeier. It means you move in the opposite direction to the status quo. **You have a clear difference in your industry, and it’s communicated clearly to the people you want to serve.**

It’s not easy to do something different. Pulling off a zag can feel like it’s going against every part of your being. And, in a crowded marketplace the zag is a fundamental skill. When everything is same-same, the zag helps you differentiate as a business.

THE SAFETY IN THE ZAG

With any business or a project, it might not work. If you do it the same as everyone else, it *really* might not work.

But if you can zag, you’ve got a stronger chance. **The zag gives us something that we can notice, and you’ve got something that we can talk about.**

While the zag feels risky, it’s actually a safer bet. Let’s take a look at the case study and see how my friends at Jungle Brothers in Sydney “zagged” to create the coolest gym in Australia.

CASE STUDY - JUNGLE BROTHERS

Jungle Brothers Strength and Movement is a gym set up by three guys who came from the film and lighting industry, wanting to train people to get strong and healthy.

These guys have a zag. As soon as you see their work, or walk into a space, you realise this is no regular gym or health club. I asked one of the owners Joey for his take on how they created a zag right from the start. It started with “seeing” the culture, and noticing the surface level trends going on, so they had something to go against.

“From the beginning we realised conventional fitness is super boring. One of the acknowledgements that we made is that we don’t like gym culture. We don’t like personal training culture. We think that a lot of it’s full of shit, and a lot of it’s fake.” - Joe Worthington

“The nylon, or the polyester shirts, and the super-clean haircuts. Clean shaven all the time... This idea of clean cut and perfect... “All my meals are planned out.” **We always rebelled against that.**”

Once they **saw** what they decided was a “fake” culture, they decided to zag against it.

“We decided we’re going to present something that completely cuts across the grain of that. And that’s where this idea of carving our own path came from. It’s like we’re slashing through a jungle full of bullshit to give people a path of true expression.”

(Note, it’s worth reading those last three sentences again.)

Paul, Teora and Joe created a multi-disciplinary training space that helps people get stronger, more mobile and healthier in a real-world way that resonates. They built a gym that was open to different disciplines - strength training, BJJ and movement - but also open to different cultures and different walks of life.

[Listen to a longer conversation with Joey here.](#) (Spotify link. Also available on iTunes)

Let’s take a look at the development questions for the zag.

“ZAG” DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONS:

1. When you look at your industry, what surface level trends do you see? Is everyone going the same direction? What can you see?

2. Now that you can see the status quo, how can you differentiate? With the guys at Jungle Brothers, their “zag” was built on their story. They literally incorporate aspects of their own background that they thought were cool or important. How can you move counter to a trend in a way that’s aligned with who you are?

3. Part of the Zag is you need to communicate this with the people you serve. Through your content or communication, your point of difference needs to be clear. Are you communicating your point of difference?

SKILL 5: CREATING COMMUNITY

“I have this fierce passion. I look at the door constantly. I’m crazy. The minute someone walks in that I don’t know, instantly, I’m alert. That person needs to be met within five seconds, otherwise we’ve failed her. That’s our promise... “The five second rule” is a thing. If you don’t walk over to someone the minute you see them, within five seconds, you’re in trouble.” - Nerida Bindt, Lissome

Nerida is passionate about community. Really passionate. It drives a lot of what she does at her women’s only gym Lissome, and she’s good at it too.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY?

A lot of businesses will say they have a unique community. And, while this is may be true, after seeing dozens of communities, there are definitely some differences between one that’s humming and one that’s sputtering.

Let’s look at a few things that we tend to see in a thriving small business community:

1. **Strong lateral connection.** Get-togethers happening with your clients or members (even if they don’t see each other regularly), or message threads being formed organically are great examples.
2. **A shared language.** In a tight community we often see some unique elements in the language or terminology used. This could also be a concept that’s unique to the community. In the coffee culture for example, it could be a particular type of roast. Motorcycle clubs, chess clubs and even online communities share this characteristic. You want to create a unique language in your business community.
3. **A strong sense of belonging.** It’s clear when people feel like they belong. They relax in the space, they laugh, they tell jokes, they welcome new people. Creating a sense of belonging is important from the start.
4. **Regular referrals.** Not always, but it’s common. When there’s a strong sense of belonging in a community, we tend to talk about it with others.
5. **Extra-curricular/social events.** When people feel connected, they like to get together. It makes sense, **but it’s also amazing how many business owners with a community will leave this one out.** Organising parties, or a workshop for people to connect with outside of the day-to-day business activities is a great way to build more connection.

WHO IT'S FOR, WHO IT'S NOT FOR

Communities are often brought together by a shared set of beliefs. Maybe it's a belief in health, in business, in mindset, or a belief in connecting with friends over great food.

The clearer these beliefs are, often the stronger the bond in the community.

This means that the community is “for” a particular type of person. Or, a person with a particular world view or set of beliefs, at that time. And, this also means that a strong community is “not for” another particular group of people.

Nerida from Lissome breaks it down further:

“If you want to train and be on your own, and do your own thing, and look out for yourself, go to another gym. You're not one of us.” - Nerida

It's important to note here that this is not excluding people, or being “against” someone with an opposing set of beliefs. It's simply understanding that as social beings, *we like to hang around people like us.*

In fact, Nerida makes a clear effort to make them happy as well:

*“We want to find out early, are you one of us? Or are you not? Because if you're not, let's put you on a path that's better for you. **We want you to be happy.**”*

This clarity on who's in and who's out, tightens the tribe at Lissome. This is clear within the community, and also, from outside the community looking in.

“We know very very well who we are, and who we're not. We go to fitness events, and you never miss it. Lissome is the loudest in the corner.”

PERSISTENCE

One of the reasons why building and maintaining community is so difficult, is that **it needs its own, separate energy input.** As an owner or creator, it's not about us, or how we feel, **we need an unwavering commitment to the community itself.**

This also means that if you're tired, if you go on a holiday, or if you get busy with another part of the business, someone still needs to be injecting that energy into the community, every single day.

If a community is left alone, energy dissipates, both at the top level, and with the people in the community itself.

Nerida spells it out for us:

You've got to say it to the point where you think people are getting sick of hearing about it. I'm like that with the "community" thing. I'm constantly saying it - "hey can you go up and introduce yourself to them." "Make sure you high five them..."

In this case study we see a strong sense of community in a women's gym. However, we can look at any thriving small business and usually find a similar thing, even when clients are served individually (the community just forms around a different platform).

[Listen to a longer conversation with Nerida here.](#) (Spotify link. Also available on iTunes)

Let's take a look at some development questions to see how you can ramp up the community in or around your business.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONS:

1. A strong community can be formed around a similar set of values or beliefs. What does your business stand for? What is at the core of what brings everyone together? Write out your top 3 values for your business, and below each one, outline how this is communicated to the people you serve.

2. Community is strengthened through lateral connection, which needs a platform. This is a place or way for your people to connect. This "platform" could be online (message thread or group), or it could be offline, for example in a monthly event. What's your platform for the community?

3. A community needs constant energy input. There's almost a constant need to be organising and creating events or "things to be a part of." Who has this role in your business? And what measures do you have in place to track their activity and progress?

SKILL 6: CHOOSING YOUR SUPERNICHE

A while back I had marketing legend [Seth Godin on the podcast](#). Seth has changed the way I look at a lot of aspects of small business, including marketing.

In the interview, he told me a story about a bakery in New York. Typically, New York is one of the noisiest cities in the world. And while there are over 8 million people living there, you can still find a lot of half-empty shops.

In one area, Seth told me you can walk for blocks before you see one particular bakery, with a line out the door.

The question is, how did this bakery get such a long line? Why is it so popular? Was it because they were noisier than everyone else to rise about the hum of the New York traffic and buzz? Of course not.

The bakery he's talking about is just very clear about who they want to serve. **They know exactly what they stand for, who they want to serve, and how they want those people to feel.**

So they can speak directly to those people, who of course want to come back later for more, because it's for them.

This group of people you want to help is called your minimum viable audience. For the bakery, out of over 8 million people in New York, the bakery only needs a few hundred per day to be the busiest bakery in the area.

I call your minimum viable audience your Superniche. The specific people you want to serve.

You have to *decide* on the type of person you want to help, because if you don't you'll try to speak to everyone, and it won't work. Who are they, what do they believe in, and where do they want to go in their lives?

Choosing your superniche is a skill. It's a skill that takes guts, but is key to thriving in small biz.

CASE STUDY - BEN GREENWOOD

How do we pick a superniche? Where do we start? A lot of times, we can look at our own personal story when we're choosing a superniche. This is natural for some, and more difficult for others.

Usually, it's easier for us to help people who are facing a challenge that we too have struggled with and overcome previously.

When we dive into Ben's story, we can see how it helped him find his superniche for his business coaching offroad and motocross riders:

"I started racing when I was nine. I got a bike for my fifth birthday. As I got older, when I was 18-21, that became the thing that I did. Then I got some top ten results in national events in offroad."

Straight away, Ben had some early experience in motocross and offroad. His story continues.

"When we were trying to have kids, I went to a naturopath, and got my blood taken. That's when I found out I was pretty unhealthy. I was pre-diabetic. My fasting blood sugars were through the roof. My inflammation markers were really high. That was a really challenging situation at the time. But that was the turning point for me doing what I'm doing now."

This was the event, or incident that led to Ben turning his health around. **From here, he started to coach other riders in strength, mobility, nutrition and lifestyle.** But he still hadn't narrowed completely down on his niche. He was still serving a lot of general-population clients.

Over time, Ben realised that while the motocross and offroad culture wasn't known for its health, people were ready to change. **They wanted to learn, and Ben had the experience, the education and the insights that could help.**

So Ben niched down and got clear.

"I know that I had very little guidance when I was racing, and I got to a really high level... I know I wasn't anywhere near my true potential. And people pour tens of thousands of dollars into racing every year.. But they're leaving so much on the table. "

"So the big thing that I'm working on now is my online stuff. That's my niche. Motocross and offload guys that race."

UNDERSTANDING THEIR CHALLENGES AND WORLD VIEWS

Once you choose your superniche and start to understand their deeper challenges your marketing can really improve.

“An example for these guys is cardio training is massive. Lots of people who have come into the training space have treated these guys like cyclists. Cardio, cardio, cardio... But we’re wrestling a 100kg motorbike around a track, so you have to have a good base of strength. So people get injured, and then they don’t really rehab, they don’t work on their mobility. So it just starts this spiral, this downhill spiral.”

By choosing his superniche, **Ben knows the exact challenges that they face.** He knows the typical way that they approach training, the lack of results that this brings, and he understands how he can “zag” - move in a different direction, with a better solution than anyone else in the market.

CLARITY MEANS GROWTH

Without a clear niche, growing a small business is pretty tough. It’s difficult to dial in our messaging, our marketing and delivery. Once we choose our superniche, our message gets clearer, and we can build confidence. We can start to grow a business.

*“Even with Covid in 2020, this was my biggest year in growth and biggest year financially. The biggest thing has been with my going all in on it. If you look at my content now, it’s just all about motorbikes. Before, I used to do a post about my general pop clients. It was one or the other. **Now I’ve just super-niched right down. I’ve changed the instagram handle. It’s all moto-based... Now I’m starting to see the payoff from that. It’s flowing through.**”*

[Listen to a longer conversation with Ben here](#) and [here](#). (Spotify link. Also available on iTunes)

Let’s take a look at some development questions to get clearer on who your work is for.

(Already clear? See what happens when you dig deeper. What might happen if you had even more empathy for the people you serve?)

SUPERNICHE DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONS:

1. Who is your work for? What are their beliefs, their world views, their wants and their needs? What do they do, where do they do it and why?

2. What is the specific change you want to help these people make? What is the deeper change you want to help them make that is beyond the surface-level utility of the service that you offer?

3. How are you communicating with the people you serve in a way that maps to their world views, language and beliefs? If someone else were to look at your content, website or broader marketing and brand, is it clear who this is for, exactly?

4. Finally - now that you've gone through the questions, do you think your superniche is clear enough?

SKILL 7: SELF AWARENESS & COMMUNICATION

“Be brave enough to own your own stuff so you can deeply connect with another human being, so you can deliver a business... We can only do as much work in our relationship as I’m willing to do on myself.”

- Shelley Lentfer, Pineapple Fitness

SMALL BUSINESS IS BUILT ON RELATIONSHIP

And not just at the business-to-customer level. Top level relationships are just as (more??) important.

If you’re a sole operator, your relationships in your family, with your spouse, will impact how you show up.

If you’re in a partnership, the relationship between you and your co-founder is critical to the success of the business.

And of course, the relationship between you and your staff or team is also critical.

How we feel about ourselves, how we feel and communicate with the people around us, and how they feel about us all impacts our business.

Developing self awareness and relationship skills is key to small business success.

COMMUNICATION STYLES IN RELATIONSHIP

What kind of communication works best for you? What about the people around you? How do you like to receive feedback? Understanding your own values, beliefs, and those of the people around you is helpful for strong communication. **Over time, this can be the difference between a business that grows, and one that collapses through avoidance, blame, and lack of action.**

Let’s take a look at a case study and see how Brit and Shell from Pineapple Fitness tackle this self-awareness piece.

GETTING OUTSIDE HELP

A lot of times, this type of personal work is really hard to do on our own, so one of the first things that the founders of Pineapple Fitness did is reach out for guidance:

*“One of the first things Brit and I did in business is invest money (that we didn’t have at the time) to go and seek counselling - kinda like couples counselling. Not because we were “broken,” but to ask “what can we do?” **Because if we’re going to continue to build this business, we need to model a great communication with each other.**”*

Seeking outside help can often supercharge this work. Asking “how do we best show up for each other?” can point towards ways that we can create a more vibrant community on a broader level.

We can see that this self development work is proactive. It’s not looking for guidance or external help because we feel that we’re in trouble, but because we want to optimise.

“When we decided to go get counselling from my marriage counselor... we kept collecting tools to put in our tool bag.

*“One of the things our counsellor said was imagine you have a lighthouse, and all of your values are written on your lighthouse. **When you’re in trouble, look up at the lighthouse, and that’s where you can come back to - common ground.** There have been tricky times - really hard conversations. But we both value honesty and integrity. So I know that whatever Brit says is coming from there.”*

Shell told me this great working relationship wasn’t something that happened right away, but rather, **it’s a skill that we can all work on, and is a key part of being in business.**

“This didn’t happen overnight. As we’ve matured on our own personal journeys, together, we become more and more comfortable. And knowing how each other works, rather than be frustrated by each other’s character traits, we can see how we can celebrate them, because I don’t have the things that she has.”

This has put Brit and Shell into a great position where they can navigate business challenges and hurdles quickly and smoothly, finding a solution together. It also models a great energy of understanding for their broader community of over 130 women, the “Fine Pines.”

“We’ve done so much work. From our initial therapist, to business coaching, we’ve really learned each other’s personality, inside and out.”

“Now we’re both in a place we can really relate on every level to each other.”

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

In every small biz, there are conversations we need to have that aren't easy. Maybe something wasn't actioned, maybe something was said, or something was left out...

The ability to dive into these difficult conversations is critical. Like the rest of this document, navigating difficult conversations is a skill, and having the skill helps create speed and action.

Brit and Shell can skilfully move into anything that comes up because of the work that they've done:

Shell breaks it down:

"We don't want to dance around an issue with all the niceties. Let's just get together, talk about what we need to talk about, great, love ya, and see ya."

Brit smiles, and replies:

"Yeah, and get on with it. And pull each other up on our stories, because so many stories come up in business. If you don't pull each other up, you just go around in circles."

[Listen to a longer conversation with Brit and Shell here.](#) (Spotify link. Also available on iTunes)

Let's look at a couple of focus questions to build more self awareness around relationship and communication...

SELF AWARENESS DEVELOPMENT:

1. What kind of situations or conversations do you shy away from?

2. What do you find uncomfortable about these conversations?

3. How do you best receive feedback?

4. When you have something you need to say to someone, do you have a clear process to do this?

5. Who could you enrol in your business journey to help you with this so that you can step into clear action, and move forward with the important work that needs to be done?

6. How else could increasing your self awareness or emotional intelligence help with your business relationships and business?

SKILL 8: BECOME TRULY CUSTOMER CENTRIC

“Customer Centric” is a term that’s been thrown around for a while. **It means that the customer absolutely, necessarily comes first, every time, no matter what.** One example of this could be the shift towards speed and convenience that we’ve seen across almost all industries - Amazon, UBER Eats and more.

But we can go beyond speed and convenience. Rather than go up against Amazon (you’re not going to win), **you can work to create specific emotions or feelings for a specific group of people that care.**

“Thinking” in a customer centric way is a skill. When we look for examples, the service sector can be good, but the hospitality sector is great. **In hospitality, if you aren’t customer centric, you simply don’t last.**

I’ve often said that small service based businesses can learn a lot from hospitality and retail... so let’s call on Ben Richardson, who owns an amazing (and leading) café here in Newcastle called the Autumn Rooms.

DON’T LEAVE IT TO CHANCE

It’s great to *think* we’re customer centric. But this is ongoing work that takes a huge amount of energy and empathy. To make it easier, we can develop systems or frameworks that are customer centric. This helps guide our day to day actions.

“For the staff, a sequence of service, and having a framework is key. If I have a set of rules, people (staff) know they can come to work and know “I can be myself, I can laugh, I can have fun with customers.” And that’s how I like to build a culture.”

With a sequence of service, or framework in place, staff can relax, because they have a structure to guide them. When the staff is more relaxed, then so are the customers. This helps us to feel welcome as we walk in:

“In hospitality, you want people to walk through the door, and you want them to think, “wow, I feel really welcome.” “It’s like I’ve walked into someone’s home.”

(Note: Is this just in hospitality? Reflect on your own business - when they land on your website? When they walk through the doors?)

CUSTOMER CENTRIC INNOVATION

When you innovate in your business, you aren't just trying to create something new. **At a deeper level, you're really innovating the customer or client.** As Michael Schrage teaches us, we are helping them to *become* someone new, with a new set of experiences or patterns of behaviour.

Creating a “posture of innovation” in your business is important. It helps us to attract new clients, develop our product or service, and improve customer retention.

“Continual improvement is definitely one of the things we've always aimed for. As a small business, in a saturated market, you have to keep adapting. You have to keep looking out for trends and new ideas you can bring into the space. You need to excite people. Even your regulars. It's not spending a lot of money, but maybe changing how you serve something.”

Ben and the team are constantly bringing changes and twists to the service, that creates tension and mystery, to keep us coming back for more.

SEEING YOUR CUSTOMERS

Most cafés focus on the coffee and the food. At The Autumn Rooms, they've also created The Tea Rooms upstairs, **which is specifically for tea drinkers.** Ben and the team realised that tea drinkers have a unique set of wants and needs, and saw an opportunity to address those.

“With tea, temperature and time are key. So we started sending the tea out with a little timer on the side... when the timer goes off just press stop, and take the basket out. We got an amazing response from that. We started selling a lot of tea. All the tea drinkers were like “I'm so glad you look after tea drinkers, nobody does! Usually it's just a tea bag in a pot.”

“It doesn't sound like much, but when the customers walk in they were like “This is amazing.””

The impressed tea drinkers are not only going to refer more of their tribe to the Autumn Rooms, **but they'll refer more coffee drinkers too.**

[Listen to a longer conversation with Ben Richardson here.](#) (Spotify link. Also available on iTunes)

Let's take a look at some questions to become more customer centric and build a business that thrives.

BECOMING MORE CUSTOMER CENTRIC:

1. Take a day, and put yourself in your customer's shoes, literally. Wake up when they wake up, go to the gym when they go to the gym, come in for coffee when they come in. What do you notice? What do you feel? How do you want to feel? What are you looking for in each experience over the course of the day?

2. Learn to listen, not just hear. Already got it? OK, the question then is, what practices do you have in place to *actually* slow down and listen to the people you serve? If you don't have time or methods set aside for this, I'm willing to bet there's room for improvement.

3. Innovate, innovate, innovate. In business, it's easy to fall into a rut. We can do the same thing over and over, and think that it's working out great, until all of a sudden, people go somewhere else. The service may not have changed, but chances are you just aren't making them feel the way they want to feel. What measures or tools do you have to make sure this innovation is happening?

SKILL 9: OWNING YOUR STORY

“You don’t need to compete when you know who you are.” - Bernadette Jiwa

In this section we’re going to look at the importance of your “story” in small business.

Who are you, and, where do you want to go?

I’ve written a lot about personal story in my other [resource Resonance here](#), so in this section we’re going to jump straight to the case study.

CASE STUDY - TAKKESH MIZOGUCHI-THORNE, SURF FLOW

I spoke to Takkesh about his business - a movement based practice for surfers looking to improve their health, performance and longevity. We had plenty of time for the conversation, so rather than jumping straight into “what” he did, **he gave me a little of his story:**

“I created surf flow around 4 years ago through a journey with my brothers. When we were young, my mum got us involved in capoeira, soccer and other sports. It was a big influence through the music and the way we would move our bodies. And the bodywork... My mum and dad met actually when they were doing Shiatsu. So I’ve come back around after competing in surfing, and started to do the bodywork, through that journey.”

After reading this, you still might not know exactly *what* Takkesh does, but you’re getting the feeling of it, of the story behind Surf Flow.

WHAT IS SURF FLOW, AND HOW WAS IT CREATED?

Takkesh has taken his background in different movements and healing modalities, and blended it with his love of surfing. He works with surfers of all levels (including World Champions) to help them move better, feel better and surf better, through hands on body work, movement practices and more.

KNOW YOUR STORY, KNOW YOUR VALUES

Not only has Takkesh's story influenced how he's positioned to help *others*, **it also has helped him to design his ideal lifestyle.** As I write this, Takkesh and the family are living in Ohana - their customised Toyota Coaster bus - on the South Coast of NSW. He works with clients in each area that they travel to, and also flies out to private clients nationally and internationally.

"We're living full time in a converted Toyota Coaster. We've been in this round a year and a half. Before that was a school bus, for another three or four years. It's been a great journey to where we are now. I turn 30 this year."

If you check out Takkesh's instagram page or website, you'll see that it's about more than the bus - **he doesn't follow the status quo in a lot of areas.** I asked him about this - where did this value of adventure and freedom come from originally?

"Mum was a big influence in opening our awareness to different ways of living, or lifestyles, or movement. Taking us to Woodford when we were really young... Just seeing different cultures. At such a young age, you take in so much. It was definitely outside the normal box of what we would normally do."

It turns out, while Takkesh might have a story that's different to yours or mine, **we all have a unique backstory that we can lean into.** And, when we know our story, we can leverage it. We get a clearer understanding of who we are, where we've come from and how we see the world.

When we go into business, we can double down on this to create something we're proud of, rather than following the status quo.

When we learn to own our personal and business backstory, we can stand alone, and build resonance with the people we want to serve.

[Listen to a longer conversation with Takkesh here.](#) (Spotify link. Also available on iTunes)

Let's take a look at a couple of questions to get clearer on your own story...

OWNING YOUR STORY AND VISION

1. Think back on your life and business up until this point. Can you see the key events that have led you to where you are now? How have these influenced your values? Check out Resonance here.

2. Are you communicating your story with your audience or clients? Are your values clear? How are you integrating this into your business or marketing so that you can create more resonance?

FINAL WORDS

Small business is an incredibly rewarding journey. It allows you to do work that you're proud of, for people that you care about. You can create a great lifestyle, income and level of fulfillment.

At the same time, there are constant challenges in small biz, and, even as you dive into these learnable skills, you're still going to face new and bigger hurdles each step of the way.

These business owners that I've case studied have done the work. They've been in the trenches and slowly, patiently built a business that they love, working with people they care about. And, they've also shown us what it takes.

These nine skills are consistently shared by top small business performers.

If you start to practice these skills (or double down!), it will make the journey easier.

It's important to note of course, that these skills aren't exhaustive - there are other aspects that go into a business: sales, speaking, copywriting, program or service delivery and more.

At the same time though, if you look at these higher level strategic skills, you'll find that they can point you towards learning or success in other tactical areas.

Keep going, and I can't wait to see what you create.

John
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