

13 Things I've Learned in 13 Years as a Business Owner

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An entrepreneur recounts the top 13 lessons learned over the last 13 years as CEO of an online business.

Thirteen years ago this month, my brother and I launched an [experimental project](#) that quickly evolved into a full-fledged remote company. It's been an extraordinary adventure, and as entrepreneurs who started with little business experience and no funding, we never imagined our business would grow at the rate it did. In a few short years, we learned to navigate the expectations, benefits and sacrifices attached to being a business leader.

While the lessons we've learned during the last 13 years are limitless, here are the 13 that stand out most.

1. Write down your whys.

Starting a business requires a lot of hard work, time, and energy, and with that comes both highs and lows, excitement and exhaustion. Writing down the reasons you began your business – and displaying them in your office or workspace – can help you stay on track with your original goals and motivate you to keep pushing forward on those tough days.

2. Network with others from the beginning.

It's easy to put yourself inside a vacuum, where it's only you working to get your business up and running, day-in and day-out. But as time goes on, you'll find that kind of isolation isn't sustainable for real growth. There's a lot you can learn from other business owners, so build networking with other entrepreneurs, either online or in your local community, into your day-to-day schedule from the start.

By incorporating a few emails, a phone or video chat, or even a local meet-up with other business owners into your day, you'll get the chance to learn from experienced entrepreneurs on what tools and ideas worked best, and create valuable connections you can team up with or lean on moving forward.

3. Document everything.

There are so many decisions that need to be made when running a business, it can be hard to remember all the changes that have been made and the reasons behind them. Instead of trying to recall your own thought process months or years down the line, keep a meticulous log of what changes you've made in various areas of the business, similar to a developer keeping a "changelog" of their code. Document key changes and decisions you've made, including your reasoning behind them. This "business journaling" can also help spur innovation and creativity when you look back on past projects.

4. Choose work-life integration over work-life balance.

It's nearly impossible to maintain a perfect balance between your work and personal life, and attempts to do so are often accompanied by guilt over not giving more attention to one area or another. Eliminate some of this guilt by practicing work-life integration over work-life balance; that is, blending your work, personal interests, and relationships in a way that recognizes that the time required for each will ebb and flow. As a business owner especially, there will be times when you can't just clock out and go home; you're going to have to pull some late nights every once in a while.

During seasons when my business has called for more of my time, taking a more holistic approach has helped me think of owning a business as a family affair. I'm grateful to have a supportive partner, and I try to include him and my kids in my work by asking for their ideas and opinions. While I know the balance will never be equally 50-50, business ownership puts me in control of my time, allowing me to be there for my friends and family when I need to be.

5. Hire experts.

There are some areas of your business that you simply can't afford to mess up on – applying the trial-and-error method when you don't fully understand that area of your business can cost a lot of time and money to fix later.

Personal experience has taught me to do my research in areas like accounting and legal requirements, and to complement my knowledge with that of a licensed professional. To this day, each time we've enlisted the help of a consultant, the information gleaned was valuable and enabled us to make decisions to improve our business process.

6. Prioritize downtime.

I'm 13 years into business ownership, and there is still always something to be done – a new idea to try, a service to optimize, a partnership to create, an email to answer. It's exciting to have creative autonomy over something and to be able to implement different business development techniques regularly, but it can quickly become time-consuming.

Don't fool yourself into thinking you'll “take a break when...” You'll find yourself working all hours of the day and night and still having a bottomless to-do list. Instead, schedule days off, and take them. Day to day, set a general routine for when your workday will end, and stick to it. When you prioritize and follow through on taking downtime, you'll be refreshed and function better, and so will your business.

7. Provide your team with regular feedback.

Don't expect your employees to be able to read your mind and know what you want them to prioritize all the time. Regular meetings and check-ins can help make sure projects are completed on time and in the way you imagined. For remote teams, this is especially important. Without regular communication, work that is accomplished can be overlooked, and if they're working on a project that isn't at the top of your priority list, your employees may feel unappreciated, or worse, that you think they aren't working.

To mitigate this issue, update or reiterate your expectations regularly, and make sure your team members have a chance to ask questions and get feedback on what you like and what they can improve upon.

8. Let your team know how their work has helped the business grow.

People value their time and hard work, and when your team can see their “daily grind” is contributing to the success of the business, it can provide a great morale booster. Don't be afraid to let your employees know how much the business has grown and how their daily

efforts directly impact the business. An annual company newsletter is a great time to share this information, but you can also give individual updates during employee reviews.

9. Listen to your customers.

Customer feedback is one of your most valuable resources as a business owner. Happy customers leave great reviews, and word-of-mouth is still the best form of advertising, especially online. But feedback from unhappy customers can also be extremely valuable in terms of identifying how to improve your service or product.

Our company has implemented a final email upon cancellation with a link that allows our job seekers to send us detailed feedback on their experiences. We have also made it a point to be very responsive to all customer emails and requests for information we receive, no matter how small of a matter. This helps keep an open line of communication between us and our customers.

It's also important to us to let our customers know we've heard their feedback. Make it visible to your customers either through an email announcement or another form of outreach when you make a change that was requested, specifically based on customer communication.

10. Base business development decisions on data, not feelings.

As a business owner, it's easy to become emotionally invested in your company; after all, you've likely spent countless sleepless nights building it to what it is today. But even when it's difficult, in most cases, it's best to rely on data rather than your own emotions when making crucial business development decisions or implementing changes.

For example, it can feel like a crushing blow when customers don't share your enthusiasm for a particular new service, product, or feature. Avoid running into this problem by implementing testing, such as the A/B method, to help you get a clear, numbers-based view of what changes and features customers are using and purchasing. This will tell you what is valuable, without your emotions getting in the way.

11. Make exercise a routine.

This advice may sound strange coming from a business owner, but it's become clear to me over the years that working out can help melt away some of the stress that comes with running a company. When I have a regular exercise routine and stick to it, I am more productive at work, more focused on the tasks at hand, and more excited and open to new

opportunities. Even a brisk, 20-minute walk in the afternoon can do a lot to get my creative juices flowing and keep me going throughout the day.

12. Employ ergonomics and healthy office habits.

With most business-related work being done on the computer nowadays, having a workspace that is ergonomic and supports good health is essential, and can reduce stress and save you money down the line. Years of sitting with bad posture or staring at a screen without computer glasses can take their toll on the body, and medical interventions to correct these problems can be painful and costly. Designing personalized ergonomic workspaces helps prevent that.

I also like to keep a supply of healthy snacks that aren't carb-based at my desk. This helps curb mindless eating throughout the day and reduce that afternoon slump. I also house indoor plants and items like a salt lamp and positive quote-of-the-day calendar in my workspace to help ease stress and boost creativity.

13. Enjoy the ride!

Running a business, whether you're an owner or a manager, is challenging work. Offset the intense demands of the job by intentionally creating more fun, light-hearted moments with your colleagues, whether that's just chatting for a few minutes before meetings or planning regular get-togethers and holiday events.

Remember, your employees have interests and lives outside of work. Investing time into developing a personal relationship with your staff members will help them feel like they're part of a team – and having some fun at work is never a bad thing.

Final thoughts

The last 13 years have been as much a learning experience as they have been a rewarding one. My brother and I never imagined our small, family business would grow to what it has today, but being able to help job seekers while providing real remote jobs to our team and supporting our families has been nothing short of a dream come true.



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