

In launching my own public relations consultancy practice after nearly 25 years in both agency and corporate settings, the keys for me were careful planning and being smart about how I approached the establishment of my practice. I also recognized that despite the knowledge and insights that a quarter century of experience brings, I did not know enough to do this by myself. I needed to tap others who had been doing their own thing professionally and learn from them.

I surveyed more than 65 family, friends and colleagues who either had their own business or had had a business they ran in the past. It didn't matter what the business was or whether they were necessarily raving success stories. Whatever their experience, no doubt they had advice to give and I was willing to listen. The responses I received to the three questions below were insightful, practical, humorous and thoughtful, and all were appreciated and valued. Below is the unedited (other than the removal of salty language here and there) collective wisdom of entrepreneurs based on a wealth of experience. Enjoy!

What is the most important factor that has contributed to your success?

I believe in celebrating successes. But in your new role Success has a different look than before. I say this to friends when they ask how my business is going: "I try to not to confuse coverage with success or gaining momentum, or confuse momentum with income." And I think the hardest part about a PR person moving into a business owner role is that you're used to equating Momentum – wins, hits, praise – with Success. But as a business owner, Success is about Dollars. And remember, you only have to bill \$1 to be profitable!

Lessons learned over the years in both how to execute PR programs and how to operate the business have contributed to our success. Having experience helps me with confidence in myself and our staff. I have done this "own business" twice, and I am much more confident the second time with another 20 years under my belt!

A. Work hard; that is, put in the hours--both in the Malcolm Gladwell sense of investing 10,000 hours to develop expertise in my chosen fields and in terms of starting early and working late to meet your own high standards and stay ahead of the competition.

B. Keep your word. The best and most enduring business relationships are grounded on trust. Be honest in everything you say and do and bring real integrity to all transactions, especially when billing for services and accounting for funds. Don't disappoint. Show up when you say you'll do so. Woody Allen was right: 80% of success is just showing up.

C. Be better, smarter, faster or cheaper than the competition. Anyone can do it, but you have to work at it all the time.

D. Be lucky, recognize the luck and seize the opportunity. Everyone gets a break now-and-then, but most people don't recognize their good fortune and fail to turn it into something more permanent.

E. Be nice to people. This is sometimes the hardest factor for me, and the one where I disappoint myself most often; but, it's the one that pays the greatest dividends, especially when you don't expect dividends.

F. Share the credit, even when no one else deserves it.

Staying focused. Keeping my eye on the ball. Always looking ahead. And always looking for a better way....more profit....better results. In baseball it's called coaching one inning ahead. Be proactive not just reactive. Many times it's just doing it, changing it if it's not working or tweaking it if it is. You better be flexible or you will run out to centerfield with a hockey stick in your hand!! Wrong sport Skippy!!

Never say die - You will get knocked down, numerous times. It definitely makes you stronger and you would be surprised what you can do after you have been through the fire.

As a freelance writer, the most important things for me were being self-motivated, not being afraid to talk to strangers and the ability to write a killer cover letter.

I had the support of my family and friends. Plus, I believed in myself.

Treating it like a business. There are a LOT of people who do this because it provides more flexibility or allows them to focus on what they really like. I have treated it exactly the same way I treated going to work at an agency – I get started on time, focus on great client service and try to keep on top of the changing wants and needs of the market.

I would say find/develop a mentor not in your industry: CPA, accountant, insurance, lawyer, etc. You may already have some who are friends, but there's a difference. It can get lonely in a way that friends cannot help or empathize. (And when you have an accounting question...)

Presuming I am successful, I think much of my success is attributable to being in the right place at the right time, knowing the right people and having the right skills to do what those people needed done. It's serendipity, I realize. But I'll take a little credit for the skills and for being able to position myself close to potential clients. I also self-defined my consulting business to the community where I had previously worked and where I lived. I didn't try to compete with "big" agencies. I stuck to my turf and typically charged much less than the "big guys" do.

In my line of work, I would have to say finding an equal balance between clients has been the key factor for my success. It can be tricky and at times downright difficult to hand hold each client as if they were the only one I have. When the client feels that they have your full attention and support, it makes every decision less stressful. And being able to pull that off has been nothing short of a miracle!

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I stuck with what I know and do best. I didn't try to deviate completely off the path.

First, your work does not define who you are. A solo venture may work, and it may not, but if you don't try you never will know. Define what success means to you and own it. Success may be having a schedule that allows you the luxury of tennis or the ability to work remotely from a beach cottage with puppy at your feet. Success is not only money.

Networking, followed by having a business plan. I spent the first year and a half in overdrive having lunches and making myself visible. Referrals and opportunities followed. And not just PR events and friends, but with attorneys, business leaders and other referral sources. Also, refer business to others – they will know you as not just a money-hungry PR person, but more as a fair business person. This rep will go far.

While I can't underestimate the importance of luck, I also have to say that the fact that I've maintained excellent relationships and an excellent reputation has also contributed quite a bit. As a matter of fact, I think every consulting opportunity I've had has come through people I've worked with in the past, be it opportunities to work with them again, or referrals from them for new opportunities.

Knowing "success" some months is simply staying afloat. Also, I'm fearless! I will call anyone on the planet for a meeting.

The most important factor is the relationships I've formed. Not only through direct client service (excellence, and over-delivering value), but through networking and being a part of my many communities (being a trusted resource and positive model that lives what he espouses). Referrals and WOM are generated this way.

It's tough to name just one factor. I'd have to say it's my network of colleagues and my reputation...both were in place when I launched my practice. Nearly 100 percent of my business comes from referrals.

Making the decision that I want to be successful and on my own terms. My success will look very different than your success so it's not necessary for me to compare myself to others for validation. It's time for me to make money and I'm not ashamed to admit it. In fact, I'm excited to acquire financial wealth so it will allow me to live a more prosperous lifestyle and give back to the community.

What has been the biggest challenge, or lesson learned, in running your own business?

The biggest challenge is to have the resolve/belief to NOT take on work that would be income but wouldn't further your business or brand. I believe that you are better off taking on smaller tasks – even at a discount – that might lead to a good connection or better relationship with a colleague or someone who might refer you to another job, rather than taking on bigger projects that don't lead to business growth. You need to define and stay true to what your personal business brand is – and part of the journey is that “who you are” and “what you are” becomes clearer the more you connect with people and other businesses.

The lesson learned is to adjust quickly to market downturns so that the company does not get 'overextended.'

Asking for help. I always had to do everything myself. People want to help others, and had I sought more help, more people would have been invested in my success.

People don't really give a darn about you...it's all about them. What can you do for them? WIIFM (what's in it for me!)...they want it FREE not just cheaper. They want it NOW not yesterday. They think they are doing YOU a favor by doing business with you. Basically, people are jerks and if you understand that concept going in....you are ahead in the game!!

You can't count on anyone but yourself. It took me a while to learn this, but after you get it, things get much smoother.

Perhaps the most difficult thing for me was isolation, since I worked at home. Most of my clients were in different cities and communicating too much via e-mail became problematic. I would occasionally fly to New York on my own dime just for a little "face time." Also, most of us make friends at work -- I had to make a concerted effort to make friends and develop a social life unrelated to my work in Tulsa, which turned out to be quite rewarding.

If you enjoy what you do, then it doesn't seem like work.

If your experience is like mine, you won't have the luxury of working for really big clients (although I worked with AT&T for several years and have been working with Lockheed Martin for over a year now). More often, it is the smaller and faster growing companies that seem to be comfortable working with me and other independents have told me the same thing. It puts a premium on excellent service and value. These types of accounts can be great because you can grow the account with the success of the client as they grow, but they are higher risk as well – not all of them succeed. Protect yourself with upfront payments, if practical, and never let accounts receivable get over 30 days before turning off the work.

You make your own luck. I used to see successful people and think "they are so lucky." You have to make your own good luck happen.

I learned early that I am not really an entrepreneur and I'm not really very business-oriented (some might describe that as "driven"). I prefer doing great work for great people and causes to making big bucks, so I typically underpriced myself. If I had had to depend on myself alone for financial support, I would have had to quit self-employment and return to working for someone else. Or, straightened up my act and shifted my gears to become a better businesswoman.

Making sure I am able to deliver for my clients. I always found it best to not over-promise and under-deliver. It's okay to give a good "song and dance" routine to land the account - but I never go overboard in making promises I can't keep. Once the client is on board, the real work begins - whether its landing them a fabulous PR campaign, personal appearance or even a voice-over job, just being able to deliver projects to them on a timely, regular basis is a day-to-day challenge.

Collections – negotiate for upfront payment whenever possible, especially for one-time projects and clients you have not worked with previously. Even people you think who are trustworthy may fail to pay for various reasons – remember the dotcom bust? One of the worst feelings on earth is to put in weeks of the hard work and be owed a sum that will not be paid.

Over-estimating my initial value in the marketplace. No one starts at the top. This took a while for me to understand after thinking I had all the answers.

There are two challenges as I see them: Money and Time. The first is establishing, maintaining and protecting financial solvency both through prompt payables, not taking on W-2 employees, understanding that even a solo consultancy has overhead, and that you need to pay yourself too, not just carry the operating costs of your consultancy. I recommend getting a bookkeeper who works w/ you at least quarterly if not monthly, you'll never regret it. Also, economize by joining underground sharing of tools like Cision and wire services. I have long argued for solo practitioners to be eligible for scaled pricing, but these big companies don't care about this category of customer and gouge you for \$3K+ a year so you are forced to go around the system they maintain by joining up with other solos in a price/access sharing arrangement. The second is the commodity of time. There is never enough time and when you work from a home based office, you never leave work. Turn off your computer. Enjoy life, the work will be there in the morning. Don't be sending emails out at insane hours of the night or early morning. Behave within traditional business conventions. You are not a charity, you are a business, and you should behave like one.

Perseverance, stubbornness, and a true belief in yourself and your abilities. Also being smart about keeping overhead low, not buying into other people's hype about what a company should look like (fancy expensive offices when you are always meeting at your clients' offices), not expanding into ancillary businesses that you have no real business being a part of as they drive your focus away from your expertise and water down your company's value and impact. It's better to be a master of one than a jack of all trades. Have a plan and stick to it.

Marketing. Marketing and advertising and selling myself has always been the biggest challenge. As a production company in Los Angeles, my company is a dime a dozen. How to stand out has always been a challenge. I'm great at selling my clients, my friends, products, etc., but I'm not very good at selling myself. Perhaps it's my Southern upbringing where I don't want to bother people because it's rude. But I learned to get over it and call my clients and touch base to see if they needed anything. Developing relationships with your clients is key. Most of my business was return business with new clients being referred by word of mouth rather than all the online advertising we did. Be smart with your marketing/advertising dollars...they get sucked up quickly. I'm involved in Social Media marketing right now as a side gig and it is a valuable low cost tool to spread a company's message and increase visibility. Make sure you have a Facebook page. A lot of that type of marketing you can do yourself. Become an authority in your field and blog and answer questions on LinkedIn. Network, network, network.

One of the biggest challenges starting out is watching all the money going out of your account setting everything up. You will have to adjust to the fact that you are not collecting a consistently scheduled paycheck. You will have to learn to hold on to money just in case next month is slow etc. But it is easily figured out.

Accounting and finances. I've set aside Fridays to manage my Quickbooks. When I don't do this, it create major problems when tax season arrives. But, fortunately, I have a good accountant. Also, having a good attorney to review matters on-call. Yeah, he charges, but it's protected me. The key to finances is figuring out if you are making money – real money to continue investing and working toward retirement.

The biggest challenge is knowing when it's best to say "no" because I never want to overcommit and under-deliver. That, and being the one-man band, especially when you're having IT issues!

The biggest lesson learned is staying true to my gut. Knowing when something doesn't feel right and having the courage to say "no" or walk away. Even if it might cost me \$\$\$. But in the face of all that, being honest and respectful as a business owner and a human being -- not burning bridges.

The biggest challenge initially was not asking to be paid what I was worth. I was undercharging for my services because somehow I felt that I didn't deserve what I perceived to be a high hourly rate. Yet for my services, it was certainly a reasonable fee to charge. Now I am much more confident about what I have to offer, so charging the appropriate fee is not an issue. I am also willing to turn away business if potential clients expect me to lower my rates.

The biggest challenge is cash flow, but thanks to good credit, we're able to weather the slower times.

Don't assume anything. Always ask!

What is the best advice you can give to someone just starting out on their own?

At the outset, your business and personal brand should be a natural extension of your career to date. Don't just say, Well I used to do healthcare but now I want to do Green. If, as they say, your best business is going to come from referrals, then you have to be open and accepting that people are going to want to refer business to you in the manner at which THEY believe you are at your best. And that may not necessarily be the types of business that you want to work on at the outset. "I'm experienced in THESE things, but I want to do THOSE things." You can get there, but use the THESE things to build yourself as a business brand so you can show how, individually/as a company, you've had successes.

Realize that in consulting you are always on the hunt for new clients. Get your infrastructure in place for it and work it regularly. And enjoy it.

Don't spend tomorrow's income today. Be your own banker. Cash flow is king, so never mortgage your success.

Stay true to yourself. Do the best you can do and if that's not good enough for them....NEXT!! Also...there's never enough money set aside...in savings...credit line, etc....you think it's covered and something else comes along. Lack of capital is the #1 reason start-ups fail. Rice & beans for 3-5 years!! Believe me....been there/done that!

A simple one: Do something every day that will help you grow your business. Mix in some easy ones because it gets real hard after just a few months. Don't keep busy during the day on completing easy tasks. It happens to everyone – you get a little stressed and you tend to kid yourself that you accomplished quite a bit, doing almost nothing. Reality checks are important.

You can do it! Try the shotgun approach if you have to at first -- you can specialize later.

Believe in yourself.

Keep asking for advice and take full advantage of the wealth of talent that is out in the market. As you are just getting started, make sure everyone in the PR community is aware of what you can do for them and the value you can deliver. Also, you were in agency management so you know this – if you have an unbillable hour, that is lost forever. Better to fill up your calendar with work at a reduced rate rather than lose that "inventory" in my opinion. So as you get started, I recommend making others know that you will work for them at a wholesale rate until you get established – and then pump up your rates to retail as you get to 70%+ capacity. When you reach 100% capacity, you can be at full rate and begin sending work out to others who are willing to give YOU their hours at wholesale. That's when you can have a 100% markup on their work, make more money than you ever did as an agency honcho AND the client feels they are getting a great deal.

Set measurable goals, 3 months out to a year or 18 months. This is a cliché, but it is hard to adjust to not having someone holding you accountable. It is easy to put this off. When I catch myself thinking "why am I always reacting, or on defense," it is normally because I got away from setting goals and not letting outside influences distract me.

- *Don't keep a TV on in the room when you're working. It's too easy to watch "Oprah" and "Judge Judy" rather than work. Keep music on instead that is relaxing and not something that you'll be distracted by. Unless Oprah or Judge Judy have musical guests on...then it's okay.*

- *If you must watch TV...watch "Ellen". She's much funnier than Oprah and Dr. Phil and laughing is so much better during the day than crying during "Oprah" or hearing Dr. Phil say "How's that workin' for ya" for an hour.*
- *Don't keep Instant Messenger programs up or Facebook. Too easy to just check them "for a minute" and then...it's been hours and you realize that your Farmville property has grown four times it's previous size and you have too many crops to water and animals to feed.*
- *Have snacks and beverages available in the house...cause you'll want them. Try to keep more healthy ones than not...cause chips always win over carrot sticks. Every time.*
- *Take at least a half hour or hour break sometime in the day...even if it's just to sit outside and clear your mind. You need to give your eyes and brain a break and watching humming birds or drunks stumbling by is a nice way to do that. If you see me stumbling by...at least wave. If I can focus enough to see you...I'll wave back.*
- *Also...wear underwear all the time, even if you're working from home. You never know when you might have an accident while reaching up on the high shelf for the Doritos and fall...forcing you to call an ambulance to come to your rescue who will then take you to the hospital and just as quickly tell everyone at the squad about seeing your butt.*

Be self-confident and self-aware. Know your strengths and play to them. Don't be afraid to say "no" to something you know isn't your forte or to someone you'd rather not work with or for. Get and stay as organized as you can. Dedicate space to "work" and don't mix "work" with home and personal space. Get up, get dressed and go to work each day (easier said than done). Then quit and "come home." In short, don't allow yourself to become a 24/7 employee of your own firm.

Establish genuine, solid relationships! Each year, I set aside x amount of dollars in my budget to allow for remembering special occasions for my clients and other business associates i.e. birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, etc. and of course anything that requires congratulations for achievements. I just have a genuine interest in people's successes and celebrating milestones that are important to them. It makes them feel supported and appreciated - a true part of your life rather than just in business, which in turn makes them happy - and if the client is happy.....well you know the rest! :)

Surround yourself with people smarter than you. I put that thought into practice via setting up an "informal advisory board." These are people who I felt at ease reaching out to for advice on starting and growing the business. I also made sure to have great staff and consultants who stepped into areas outside my core competency - finance, HR, IT, legal etc. Working for yourself can sometimes be lonely. One way to kill two birds with one stone is to treat an advisor/friend out to lunch and pick his/her brain on an issue you might be dealing with.

Trust your gut and follow your passion. I know this sounds like an overused cliché, but it is so true and paves the way to success and happiness!

Don't try to be all things to all clients. Know who you are, what you do best, and stick to your knitting. Be able to articulate your distinctive brand promise so that others can as well-- i.e, be able to succinctly answer the question: what do you do? Here is a related essay for your inspiration: <http://claritygroup.com/newsandviews/?p=94> Make sure your industry friends who can be referrals or clients know what you do and how to reach you. Partner with other professionals who bring other skills and knowledge to the table, because if it goes well they'll soon be bringing

business for you to that same table. Don't compete on price. Compete in value and impact. Be clear in your value to your client, your vast career depth, intelligence and achievements. Don't be afraid to say "no." Don't apologize for the home office business model-- in fact, turn it as a positive in that your clients get the best advisor without needless trappings and overhead built into the package. I call Clarity a "networked consultancy" because I think the use of the word "virtual" strikes fear, like the people aren't really "there." Also, present professionally. Get a business phone number vs. a personal cell phone (-1500) and have nice business cards at a minimum. Consider all big and small agencies as competitors and make sure you can stand up in them in the quality and investment of your business tool kit. Definitely engage in social media like Twitter's #journchat. Especially as a crisis advisor, you have to know that Twitter and Facebook are channels of potential brand ruin if you aren't plugged into commentary about your client, their company, a hot news topic or competitors. ASK FOR HELP. ASK FOR LEVITY. ASK FOR INSPIRATION.

Keep things simple to start with. Make sure your personal assets are protected from your company so make sure your company is an LLC or Corp where if the company gets sued they can't come after you personally. Quickbooks online is a great and easy to use accounting tool that keeps track of everything and even creates invoices and checks. You can also keep detailed expense reports and now that you have your own business you can expense a ton of things including your home office or take that as an expense on your personal taxes. Also, make sure you have a great accountant who is knowledgeable about your type of business and can advise you about tax implications. They change all the time as your income fluctuates and trust me...you may have to lay down to right the IRS a huge check after your accountant failed to warn you about your taxes. Make sure you have a business license...cities are cracking down on that. Also, explore disability insurance in case something happens and you can't work.

Read Joan Gladstone's book, available for purchase and download from PRSA.org web site. I've borrowed heavily. Don't go cheap just to get business. Your experience and background are worth \$\$\$\$. Make sure you are at least 50% billable, but also ensure time for a life. It's very easy to start your day at 6 and end at 11 *hey, just like agency life. And, work weekends. But that's not why you went into business for yourself. Also, find accounts that will make you happy. Mine are environmental/green. I've provided pro bono services in some of these areas that soon developed into paying gigs.

To me, consulting success is about a combination of flexibility and discipline. Flexibility because you often have to turn around on a dime, or may need to juggle your schedule to accommodate consulting commitments. And discipline because nobody is going to force you to get your timesheets done, your invoices out on time, keep your book-keeping up to date, or to work when you have a serious case of spring fever.

Create an abiding belief in yourself. Find ways to reinforce that belief every day!

Create a living, breathing business plan and keep looking at it. Make sure your business is founded on well-articulated vision/values/mission and you have a strategic plan to support it. Again, keep looking at it and revising/refining it as you learn and grow. Too many people create the plan but then stick it on a shelf.

- Don't compromise. I hear of so many people who reduce their rates and work for much less than they're worth just to get the business. This practice doesn't help our industry, and it undermines the value of what we bring to our clients.
- Stay confident in your ability.
- Network like crazy.
- Be open to partnering and know that there is enough business for everyone.
- Keep up with professional development.

Get out there and network! I have joined a few professional networks and I attend networking functions at least twice a week. I love it! It's a chance for me to talk to people about what I do and I enjoy listening to what they do. I am always thinking about ways to support people with their businesses and create partnerships where possible. I think it is so important to have a "dream team" or support system out there because having a business of your own can be lonely.

Endeavor to Persevere!