

The Path to a Better Business

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When my interest in entrepreneurship began to develop as a young man, I was on a mission to find that magic idea that would deliver my big payoff. Lots of business concepts came to me, but none seemed special enough. I resisted the mundane.

I saw the glamorous profiles of entrepreneurs in magazines like *Forbes*, *Fortune*, and later, *Inc. Magazine*. It always seemed those dynamos had come up with incredible ideas that hit the market just right, and catapulted them to greatness. Interviewers always seem to gravitate to the question: “How did you come up with that idea?” Like many of the observers I thought the magic was in the idea – not execution.

I probably wasted years in search of that perfect idea or product to build a business around. I frequently came up with thoughts that seemed less than earth shattering, and I often drew a big blank when it came to implementing business ideas out of the norm. What I didn’t realize was how many business people had become stunningly successful by focusing on mundane products and businesses. I also didn’t realize how much ongoing learning and testing was required as a business person, and how much it’s about “how you do it” rather than “what you do.”

Over the years, I began to see companies experiencing magnificent growth built around products and services that seemed less than original. I can’t tell you how many fast growth companies seemed to be working from the same playbook; marketing products and services in categories where there were already tons of competitors. It became apparent the secret to their success was that they approached mundane businesses, in a non-mundane way.

One example of a business category seemingly offering endless growth opportunities has been pizza. In my business career, I’ve seen multiple pizza brands emerge on the scene from Pizza Hut to Domino’s, Little Caesar, California Pizza Kitchen and today’s heavily marketed brand, Papa John’s. Oddly, none of these businesses seem to deliver the stellar quality that my favorite pizza joint in Brooklyn did when I was growing up. As a kid I would sit on a stool in amazement, as patrons crammed into this small shop waiting for the owner to pull out one of those beautiful, lovingly made pizza pies out of the oven. The pizza was hot, fresh, delicious, and had just the right blend of cheese, sauce, and crust. Everyone in the neighborhood knew that, yet it probably never occurred to the shop owner that he could have a business any larger than he did. After all, he was just selling pizza.

In time it’s become apparent to everyone in the pizza business there are ways to differentiate even pizza. From family style servings, thirty-minute delivery, hefty ingredients, healthy ingredients, thick crust, thin crust, fresher ingredients, and now online ordering, pizza entrepreneurs have defined their unique selling proposition and marketed the hell out of it. But none of these ideas have really been new.

Today I run into entrepreneurs all the time, growing businesses around ideas less than revolutionary. These businesses have truly figured out how to make the mundane, interesting. Think coffee, greeting cards, jeans, water, and you name it. There are huge, fast-growing businesses where the centerpiece is a familiar product. How do they do this? They accomplish it, by focusing on execution; not strategy.

It’s called strategic execution in academic settings, and it means taking a great business idea, and getting it adopted understood, and implemented by your team. The fact is many brilliant business ideas are never implemented. What’s remarkable about the pizza entrepreneurs I mentioned earlier is not only their vision and confidence, but their skill in execution and bringing their products to market. In other words, it’s all about, getting it done.

To execute you must be able to make things happen. That means selling your idea, keeping your team focused, motivated, and getting results. You must be resourceful, diligent, and patient. You must also have the ability to overcome difficult people and circumstances. Sometimes you might not be everyone’s favorite person, but you must do what it takes to achieve the seemingly impossible.

What it takes is being able to look at the mundane and see how you can turn it into a masterpiece. Then you must commit to the mundane, which is, taking the same steps over and over until you gain ground. You must have the right plan and find the words to help others become excited about implementing your plan – even if the uniqueness isn’t apparent to others.

Don’t get me wrong. You must have a great business idea, but that alone is not enough. Strategic execution is not trivial pursuit. It takes fortitude. In the end, becoming a better business person and creating a better business has more to do with working on yourself so you know how to sell that idea. It’s not about finding that elusive product that no one else knows about – it’s overcoming everyone’s resistance to the mundane, including your own.