

SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS

Community
Futures White Horse Plains



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[The Online Newsletter- Part II](#) | [Letting Go of Your Business Bananas](#)
[8 Tips for Motivating Your Team](#) | [Take a Creativity Break](#)

The Small Business Owner's Management Conference

If you've ever worked for a larger company, you may have had the privilege of attending a management conference. Having just returned from an extremely successful one this past weekend, I found myself pondering the benefits of such a conference on the team. At this particular event, each team member commented on the things they valued about the experience; learning new management skills, breaking out of the box with creativity sessions, and hearing from their peers on issues they all struggled with. Most powerful however, for many attendees, was the shared camaraderie of just sitting around the table with like-minded people, a common vision and a sense of traveling together in the same direction. It got me to thinking about how small business owners miss this opportunity of shared vision and camaraderie. Many small business owners don't have a management team - they're it! Some aren't even a member of a team if they work in a home-based business.

Perhaps it was coming out of the creativity sessions this weekend, but something made me stop in my tracks as I considered the plight of small business owners and management conference, and I thought . . . why not? Why not create a management conference for small business owners? Although you may not have a management team of your own, you do know other small business owners who are managers. And although you may not share with them the specific day-to-day goals for your business, you most certainly share the same goal of making your businesses succeed. I'd like to plant this seed and ask you to consider whether you could plan a management conference for small business owners in your town or area. It's really not that difficult, and the benefit you'll receive from spending a weekend with other entrepreneurs will do more than you can imagine to build your sense of being part of a larger "team". Here are some ideas to get you started.



Find a venue. Sounds easy -

because it is. Check with hotels in your area (or even better - just outside your area so that you really get away for the weekend) that have meeting facilities. Put together a budget of the costs - room and equipment rental, room rates, and meals. Most hotels have facilities managers that can assist you with putting together all the details.

Create a small committee. Enlist the assistance of a couple of small business owners you know would be interested in helping you to plan this event and get together to consider details like whether you want to invite a guest speaker, or whether you'd simply benefit from the collective wisdom of those who are attending. You can save a lot of money by asking people who are coming anyway, whether they'd be willing to give a presentation on a specific topic. You'll want to create a schedule for the weekend, perhaps even a theme, and you'll definitely want to plan a special event or two just for fun; perhaps attending a sporting event or concert, hiring a comedian, or planning a very nice dinner out. Finally, you'll need to decide how you're going to let other business owners in your area know about the conference. Will you create flyers, attend networking meetings, put up posters, etc? Once you've determined your venue and program costs, you can work out what the fee for attending your management conference will be. Now it's just a matter of letting people know about it and building excitement for the event. And don't be discouraged if you only have a small group your first year. The conference I attended last weekend only had 12 participants and it was a huge success! Better to start with a small number than not to start at all. Once word gets out, it will grow each year.

Some things to consider when putting together your program . . .

- Are there issues in your town that are common to all small business owners (changes in municipal bylaws, growth in your community, construction activities etc.) and is there someone who could come to your conference and address these issues?
- Are there small business owners in your community who have areas of special expertise that would be of value to a larger group (i.e. someone to talk about small business tax breaks)?
- Do you know someone who could give a relevant keynote address to your group, but who isn't terribly expensive?
- Are there round-table discussions that could take place as part of your programming on issues facing small business owners, and do you know someone who could act as a facilitator for these discussions?
- Are there general management topics (such as time management, stress management, people management) that could be explored as possible subjects for presentations?

Start thinking about the other small business owners in your area as a sort of "peer" management team, and imagine the possibilities of gathering of a group of talented, like-minded individuals interested in growing, supporting one another and sharing knowledge. Getting excited? You should be. Now get out that phone book and start the ball rolling! Be an agent of change and growth for your small business community - and yourself!

[Top](#)

The Online Newsletter - Part II

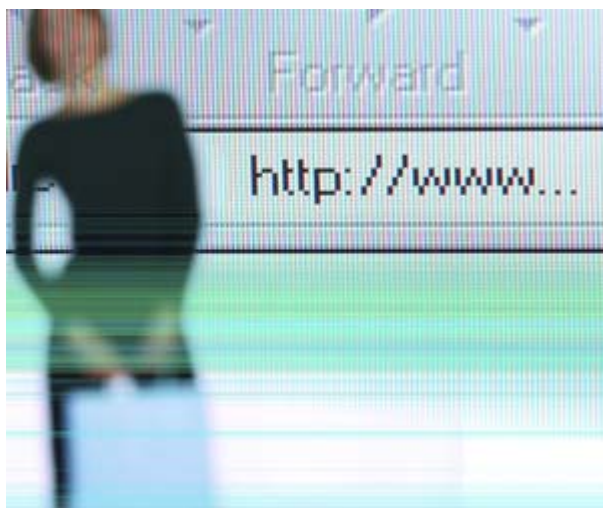
Creating a Dynamite Communication Tool for Your Business

After reading the article last month on online newsletters, some of you may have made the decision to take the plunge. If so, you may be wondering where to begin. The most difficult part is making the decisions we talked about last month - deciding how you were going to structure your newsletter, whether to do it on your own or hire someone to create a template for you, what kind of software to use, and what kind of format to use for delivery. Once you've made those tough decisions, you can begin looking at what you're going to put into the newsletter in order to make it useful to your clients or customers, as well as being a vehicle for marketing your business. There are some important things to consider. With the amount of online information circulated these days, I'm sure that you've seen online newsletters that are cluttered, irrelevant, dated, unprofessional and self-indulgent. You want your customers to look forward to receiving your newsletter each month, so here are some things to think about when putting it together.

Keep it relevant. Remember that as much as you may want to tell them about your product or how great your business is, they're only going to read it if it's useful and meaningful to them, so your content should reflect that. Think about your industry from your customer's perspective. In fact, ask people what topics they'd like to know more about. Create content that will make them feel as if they've received an added benefit from being your customer. Insider tips, "how-to's", interesting facts that will help them to do something better; if you can provide your customer with information they can't get elsewhere, they will look forward to hearing from you.

Keep it simple. Write at a level that appeals to your customer. Stay away from industry jargon that you and your technicians use, but that may not be understood by the average consumer. Remember, your goal is useful, interesting, relevant information.

Keep it short. Most people don't print newsletter information in hard copy - they read it right off their computer screens. Articles that are too long and require people to scroll down forever get tedious and



lose people's interests. I'd suggest a 600-750 word maximum; if you can make it even shorter, all the better.

Keep it professional. By this I mean stick to business-like fonts, simple headings and easy-to-read formatting. Although you'll find a lot of crazy attention-getting stuff on the Internet, folks who are reading your newsletter are doing so for the information. Using wild fonts, crazy colours, capital letters, and corny clipart doesn't add a thing to the value of the information, and will make you appear far less credible to the reader.

Keep it current. Make sure to stay on top of industry information, and ensure the articles you're writing aren't old news. Some things are timeless, but depending on your industry, putting out information that is outdated may diminish your credibility.

Keep it interesting. This may seem like stating the obvious, but I'm talking here about more than just ensuring your articles are interesting. Put things in your newsletter that will draw people back month after month. Contests, special offers, ways to win prizes, time-sensitive discounts - things that will motivate them to open your newsletter each month. You may even want to think about providing a

special major offer every few months that can only be obtained by newsletter subscribers.

Keep it varied. Make sure you provide a variety of articles in your newsletter so that your readers aren't reading about the same things every month. Last month we mentioned an online newsletter company called www.simplynewsletteronline.com. With a subscription, this site gives you access to hundreds of well-written articles on a wide variety of topics. If you don't have time to write articles yourself each month, a resource like this can save you hours! Just pick a topic, pick an article, and away you go.

By now you may be wondering why you'd go to all this trouble when I haven't said a word about directly marketing your product. The reality is, you ARE marketing your product when you provide something of value to your clients. You may not be talking about your products directly, but you are achieving top of mind awareness in your customers by having them as subscribers to your newsletter. Sometimes the subtle approach gains the most ground. Give this marketing tool a try - it's worth the effort!

[Top](#)

Letting Go of Your Business Bananas

*Have you been feeling stuck in your business? Have you been struggling for a sense of purpose? Have you been bored, fatigued, stressed or uninterested? Have you been daydreaming about what it would be like to be anywhere but where you are? It's possible that you're holding on to some bananas! I am currently reading a fascinating book titled *Letting Go of Your Bananas*, by Dr. Daniel T. Drubin. The subtitle is "How to Become More Successful by Getting Rid of Everything Rotten in Your Life." It fascinates me because I think everyone has "rotten" things or habits in their lives that hold them back from having the success they want. The book begins by explaining a process that hunters used in Africa to capture monkeys. They would put bananas in the bottom of a narrow-necked jar. When a monkey came upon the jar, it would put its hand inside to grab the banana. Of course, with the banana in hand, it couldn't pull its hand out, and remained stuck with the jar on the end of its arm, making it fairly easy to catch. No matter what, the monkey would not let go of the banana - even if the banana had gone rotten! The author draws the inference that we are often like those monkeys. Our lives are full of things that prevent us from moving forward, but because we are unwilling to let go of our rotten bananas, we also let go of potential success. I got to thinking about how this might apply to business success as well.*

According to Dr. Drubin, bananas are things or people in life that hold us back from achieving success. Sometimes, it can even be the truth about ourselves that we are unwilling to admit, that is our banana. He tells the story about a period where he was unhappy with his life. Dr. Drubin asked a mentor and close friend to tell him the truth about what he saw in his life. After the friend made sure he really wanted to hear it, he told him he thought he was the most selfish person he had ever met, and continued giving examples of how Daniel demonstrated that selfishness in his life. When he stopped to analyze what his friend had said, he realized he was right, and that his selfishness (his banana) was responsible for much of the dissatisfaction in his life. Drubin said it was one of the most difficult things he had ever heard, but it also became his catalyst for positive change.

At the end of the first chapter, Drubin gives the following keys for beginning the process of letting go of your bananas.

1. Make a list of your rotten bananas. Are there people in your life you know are affecting you in a negative way? Perhaps you've had a sense you need to do something about it but have held on because you were afraid to change. Are there habits you've developed that hold you back from achieving your potential? Perhaps you're watching too much TV, which ties up hours you could be using to move toward your goals. Or maybe you've given up going to the gym and are now struggling with extra weight or low energy. Are there practices in your business you know you ought to change because they are inefficient or unproductive, but it just takes too much energy to do something about it? Is your attitude a rotten banana? Have you been bitten by the negativity bug and lost your sense of adventure and optimism in life? Whatever the rotten bananas are for you and your business, write them down. This is important. Something happens when we write things down. We suddenly become more committed, more aware, more determined when we see those things move from our thoughts to black and white on the page.

2. Decide what or whom you are no longer willing to accept in your life. Is there a business relationship you need to sever? Are you unwilling to continue feeling sick and tired? Are you no longer willing to wake up every morning feeling gloomy and depressed? Is there a staff person you need to fire? Write down those things you want to change.



3. Be willing to get into the pain of changing your destiny. I read a quote recently that said "people never change until the pain of staying the same, exceeds the pain of making the change." And change is indeed, often painful. Are you

willing to walk through the pain of severing a relationship, getting up early to exercise, giving up your favorite television shows or perhaps your favorite foods? Are you willing to take on the pain of making changes in your business that are necessary, but may be unpopular? If your answer to any of those questions is "no", you will not be able to let go of your bananas.

4. Make the tough decisions. If you've said "yes", then act. Make the tough decisions that go along with your resolve to change.

5. Embrace the consequences of your decisions. Realize that change often brings about difficulties - people don't support you, you need to work longer hours, it has to get harder before it gets better - whatever the results of your decisions, accept them as normal, and necessary for you to progress.

6. Be totally honest with yourself and others. Acknowledge the rotten things in your life to yourself, and be honest with others about where you are going to change, and what you are going to do. If you're truly going to change, you won't be able to keep it to yourself. Your actions will affect others. Honesty in the process is integral to its success.

7. If you need help letting go of your bananas, get help! Sometimes no matter how hard we try, for some reason we just can't let go of the things or people we know are bad for us. If this is the case, get professional help. Get to the root of why you can't let go.

8. Remember, you only grow when you let go. Growth comes with change, albeit painful sometimes. You know what they say, no pain - no gain.

If you truly want to move forward in business and in life, take stock of whether there are things holding you back, and determine to do something about them. And by the way, pick up the book - it's an inexpensive, fast read that will make a huge impact!

[Top](#)

8 Tips for Motivating Your Team

Part of your job as a small business owner is to set the tone for your team. Positive energy, enthusiasm, excellence, and professionalism are the things you should be demonstrating every day. People will mirror what they see. But you also need to understand how to motivate your team, both individually and as a group. People need to be empowered through their successes AND their failures. When they succeed, empower them with affirmation on a job well done. Empower them with more significant opportunities and challenges that let them know you have confidence in them. When they fail, empower them with encouragement that helps them learn from that failure, and teaches them how to be better. Empower them with your confidence by providing second chances for them to prove themselves. Empower with your words and your actions. Here are some proven methods for motivating and empowering your team. Use them liberally and you'll have a group of enthusiastic employees working hard to make your business the best it can be.

Be great - being great is contagious. Set an example of the kind of attitude and professionalism you want to see in your team. Just as children mirror what they see, regardless of what they've been told, your employees will take their cue from you, and will model the kind of energy, values and ethics they see you demonstrate.

Study your team - read a book or take a course on understanding people's behavioural styles. I guarantee that no single piece of information will be as useful to you as being able to recognize and respond to the behaviour styles of your staff. Your team is not a "one-size-fits-all" entity. Each person is unique in how they communicate, work, and receive feedback, and in what motivates them. Use that information to troubleshoot problems, deal with productivity, AND motivate according to their specific motivators!

Pick your battles - you haven't got time to fight every battle. You have to decide when to go to the wall and when to let it go. Some things just aren't that important. If you're the type of manager who likes to maintain control - you may have some difficulty with this, but if you can do it, you'll decrease your stress level overnight. One more thing, if you decide to let it go - REALLY let it go. Don't run back into the ring and try to grab it back!

Implement strong accountability - although you don't want to be a drill sergeant, you do want your team to know they will be held accountable for the things they commit to, or the things you have asked of them. Don't let things slide - deal with difficulties right away. If your team knows they can count on you to hold them accountable, they'll work better and stronger.

Show appreciation - regularly let your team members know how much you appreciate them and the contribution they make to your business. Send an email, write a note, or give a compliment face to face and you'll notice a huge difference in the attitudes of your employees. It's human nature to want to be appreciated, and employees who feel valued are more loyal, more productive and happier in their jobs.



Build relationships - people respond to care and concern. If they believe you care about them beyond what they can do for you, they will be highly motivated to work hard for you. Don't be afraid to ask them what's going on in their lives. Find out about their hobbies, what they're passionate about, their families, their concerns. They may even surprise you in the way they'll care for you in return!



Establish healthy competition - great teams are great because together, they have a shared vision of being better than the other team! Tap into that and get your team fired up about how you can be better than your competition. Set goals that will give them benchmarks to strive for, and victories to celebrate.

Buy donuts - when it's done right, a small thing like bringing your team donuts, doing a coffee run or surprising them with lunch can be a huge morale booster and motivator. It shows them that you appreciate them, and everyone loves unexpected surprises. Be cautious however, not to overuse this motivational strategy, or you'll find yourself tempted to try to buy their productivity!

You know you've got a great team. Now step up your leadership and motivate them to even greater heights. It's good for business!

[Top](#)

Take a Creativity Break

A number of years ago a series of TV commercials showed some harried office workers at their wits end with whatever stresses were taking place at the office, and then moments later, showed those same people in a state of calm and peaceful bliss while they ate a Coffee Break chocolate bar. The tag line was "take a break - a COFFEE break". As a small business owner I'm sure you can relate to the "harried" part with all the things you have to do in a day. How often do you take a break to foster your creativity? I can hear it now - you're asking why on earth that's important when you've got bills to pay, business plans to execute, products to inspect, staff to keep on track, sales to make . . . and the list goes on. Who's got time to take coffee breaks, never mind creativity breaks? I'd like to challenge the notion that activating your creative side is a waste of time. In fact, it's proven that people who pay attention to creativity are actually more successful and productive.

Creativity is more than writing a novel or painting a picture. You actually use your creativity more than you think every day. Solving problems, coming up with new ideas, dealing with people - customers and staff - all require a degree of creativity. The problem with owning a small business is that you can get stuck in a left-brain rut, and actually lose your creative edge. It's like any muscle - the more you use it, the stronger it gets. If you find yourself too often staring out the window stuck on a problem you can't quite break through, take time for a creativity break. Routine is the enemy of creativity, so break out of it and try a few of these ideas to get yourself out of the office and into your right brain for a few minutes a week.

Go somewhere to people-watch. Grab a coffee and sit down at the local mall, downtown on a park

bench, or in front of your office building. Watch how people interact with each other. Listen to their conversations. Just getting out of your regular routine and watching other people will give you a different perspective. Then write a story, with some of the people you saw as key characters. You can actually write the story (if you like to write), or you can write it in your mind. Have fun with it.

Participate. When your life is busy during the day, the temptation to vegetate at home in the evenings is pretty big. Although there's certainly room for letting down, you can also get in a rut where you don't want to try anything new. Go to a hockey game, get tickets to a concert, get out to the comedy club, attend a business mixer, say yes to the party invitation, get out and let life hit you. Your experiences when you participate will give your life colour and help you to break the routine.

Do something with a child. Children are the epitome of creativity. They look at life from a completely different perspective. If you've got kids of your own, get on the floor and build that tower of blocks, sit at the table and help with the puzzle, blow bubbles, colour with crayons, make up stories. Nothing gets your creativity going like spending time with people who think creatively. If you haven't got kids, visit a friend who does! You may be surprised how much fun you'll have.

Listen to different music. Not the kind you usually listen to - but something completely different. If you're a classical buff, how about some reggae? If you normally like classic rock, try opera. Open your mind to the possibility of appreciating something different. Notice I didn't say enjoying - I said appreciating. All music is a creative expression. Exposing yourself to something out of the ordinary will definitely get your creative molecules bouncing!



Read a magazine on a subject you would never normally be interested in. If you have never been sailing, pick up a sailing magazine, if you're not scientifically minded, pick up the New Scientist. It really doesn't matter what the subject is, it's just about seeing things from a whole new perspective.

Eat something unusual, in an unusual way. I recently read an article about a restaurant in California that serves its meals in complete darkness. I mean a COMPLETE absence of light. Patrons are guided to their tables and served food they can't see. With their sense of sight removed, people reported a heightened and intense sense of smell and taste. They also reported eating far less than they normally would, and still feeling satisfied, shedding light on how our sight affects our appetites. The article said that people who experienced a meal at that restaurant looked at food completely differently after the experience. So try it. Eat something you'd normally not eat. Go for a picnic instead of eating at the kitchen table. Try an ethnic restaurant you normally wouldn't try. Order a hot dog from a street vendor. Or perhaps, eat in the dark! The key is, doing something DIFFERENT!

The way to expand your creativity is to break your routine. These are just a few ideas to get you out of the box. Come up with some of your own. The important thing is, indulge in creative endeavours on a regular basis. Don't let the pressure of running your business rob you of the fun life has to offer. You may be surprised how much good paying attention to your creative side will do for your business.

[Top](#)

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