

No Excuses By Carolyn Hueston

Are you burying yourself in busywork to avoid really starting your business? These 10 tips will help you change your attitude -- and get going.

Call it what you like. Procrastination. Fear. Necessary preparation. Regardless, the fact is that many new business owners fall into the trap of spending days, weeks and months staying "busy" without actually doing business. Designing business cards and setting up spreadsheets are just some of the tasks that, though necessary, make it tempting to put off doing business. After all, it's more fun to choose fonts than to make cold calls.

It's true that starting a business requires a certain amount of preparation, or as Robert Spiegel, author of *The Shoestring Entrepreneur's Guide to the Best Home-Based Businesses*, prefers to call it, "pencil sharpening." Luckily, we're here to give you 10 specific ways to move past pencil sharpening and put those pencils to work.

1. Make a List

Making lists is a common denominator in businesses that have moved forward during the startup phase. "People take time-management classes and use various electronic tools, daily planners and software, but all these tools essentially [help make] lists," says Spiegel. "Having a list [is] the most important way to keep procrastination away."

Keep the list in front of you so it's always visible. Says Spiegel, "What worked for me was to color-code the list, drawing [colored] lines beside items [to denote] whether they were to be done today, tomorrow or this month."

2. Take Baby Steps

It can be overwhelming when your to-do list is changing and priorities seem to be wrestling each other, but starting with small, manageable jobs can help thwart fears and minimize

anxiety. Focusing on what really matters often comes down to having discipline and a clear vision.

Ruth Ellen Miller, 43, and her father, Jack Miller, 76, had a lot of time on their hands in the early '90s when they started NoUVIR Research in Seaford, Delaware. The company produces a light that helps museums preserve artwork and historical documents. During more than three years of R&D and pending patents, the partners knew where their priorities lay. "It was always our goal to stop the damage happening in museums," says Jack, "but while awaiting patents, we had to pay the rent, so we did some consulting." Annual sales are now \$1 million to \$5 million.

NoUVIR's philosophy is also framed on the wall for everyone to see: "Plan big. Start small. Don't borrow." Says Jack, "That's our motto, and we never forget it."

3. Find a Customer

If you don't have customers or clients, you don't have a business. Yet finding and committing to that first customer can be a difficult hurdle for many entrepreneurs.

Don Fesenmeyer, 44, owner and founder of Don's Custom Countertops in Longmont, Colorado, recognized the value of customers from the get-go. He says, "**Without a customer, you are simply not in business.**" You have to bring in business first, then build the rest. The biggest thing you can do is try to get customers and business, then use it for leverage in financing. We started with a single customer whom I'd been working with at another company. The second customer came from a referral, and so on. With current sales at \$2 million, we are growing at a 30 percent to 35 percent rate."

4. Forget Perfection

Barrie Shepley, 42, and Sheldon Persad, 38, co-founders of Personal Best Health & Performance Inc., an integrated health and performance management, coaching and training firm in Toronto, Ontario, knew that being perfectly prepared in the beginning was not an option due to a shortage of capital, even though their business plan and corporate goals were clearly defined.

"Ideally," says Shepley, "we would have loved to have high-tech equipment available to conduct extensive physical testing for our clients. But rather than waiting, we jumped right in, working from a small office with little more than basic testing equipment, a desk and a telephone." That's about as far from perfection as a business could be.

"After a couple of months," says Shepley, "we were finally able to buy a computer and a testing bike."

Less than perfect paid off for Shepley and Persad. Now their business averages more than **\$1 million** annually and includes corporate facility management, seminars, high-performance testing and training camps.

5. Talk Business

Believing in yourself and your business might sound like hokey advice, but if you don't believe you're truly in business, as opposed to "starting a business," how can you expect anyone else to believe it?

Change your choice of words when you're out in the world. Talk about your company like it is a business, not like it's about to be a business --"I'm trying to start a business" sounds noncommittal. Even if all you've done is print your own business cards, saying things like "I own my own business," or "I have to get back to work," will get the word out that you are serious.