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smart **Advice for Success!** Business™ matters

Good as Gold!

Make quality a priority in everything you do.

First, give your products or services a checkup. Are you giving customers the best you can at the price point you set? Is there anything you can do to increase the quality without incurring a higher cost — get a new vendor for parts or product, spend more time on one aspect of a job versus another? Is the best service for the customer turning the job over to an associate who is more qualified to meet a unique demand?

Set standards of quality for your work. It helps to define what you consider to be quality work. You also need to take the comments from your customers into consideration. How valuable is your service from the customer's standpoint? What are the outcomes your customers expect for each job or sale, service provided, or performance of a product? It helps to put your standards in writing and to post them where every employee can see them. If you can easily gather measures of your quality standards, do it! Post the weekly or monthly results and trends in a visible place. If you can foster positive competition with separate measurement by group or individual, by all means try it!

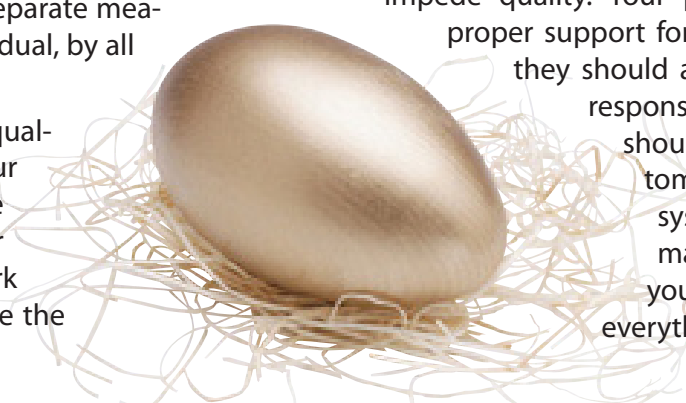
Involve everyone. To make quality a priority throughout your business, you need to involve everyone who works with or for you. The people that work on the products and provide the

services to the customer usually have ideas on how to improve quality.

Employees who are part of the plan are more likely to feel a sense of ownership and pride and to think up and more quickly implement new ideas for improvement. Plan, manage, lead, and staff to achieve better quality results and great customer experiences.

Show your commitment to quality. Showing employees you are committed to quality yourself sets the tone and provides a setting in which they can achieve their best. Train your work force to perform well and to make improvements. Praise and reward employees when their actions result in quality results and customer satisfaction.

Set quality standards for every operation of your business. Focus on "getting things done right" the first time to eliminate customer problems as well as waste of product or time. Identify operational practices that impede quality. Your processes should provide for proper support for your business, of course, but they should also provide support for quick response to customers needs. They should not stand in the way of customer satisfaction. Analyze your systems and work with staff to make improvements that allow your quality to shine through in everything you do.



Six Things to Consider When Choosing a Bank

Is your bank doing all it can for you? In a climate of change, consolidation, and loss in the banking industry, it is time to evaluate how your bank stacks up against the competition.

Relationship and Customer Service. You should have a solid relationship with your bank. Think of your banker as a business partner. Bank staff need to provide you with solutions to your problems, not with more problems. You should feel comfortable with the staff and be able to ask questions. When you have a good relationship with your bank, you are better able to obtain a loan, line of credit, or even eliminate onerous fees. Ask for testimonials, and ask other businesses about the level of customer service at their banks.

Industry Expertise. As a small-business owner, you may find you get a better banking experience at a bank which has many other clients just like you, rather than a bank that is focused on larger commercial enterprises. How likely is your bank to understand the financial needs of your business or provide you with a loan? Does your bank offer government backed loans? For example, is your bank a Small Business Administration lender? Some bank branches even cater to specific businesses: real estate development, the wine industry, etc. They may even connect you with other businesses that may be of service to you. Low rates are great, but not at the expense of expertise — your bank could be an invaluable source of services and advice.

Reasonable Fees. Comparing fees between banks is not a task for the faint-hearted, but collect as much information as you can on the services offered by each bank and the fees charged for those services. Consider the total of the fees you anticipate. Make sure you understand the minimum balance required to avoid fees. Ask other business owners about the fees at their banks. Do the fees seem reasonable, or do they seem excessive for the service provided? Be aware that banks may also have several options with some types of commercial checking accounts carrying more fees than others, or some savings vehicles offering more interest than others.



When discussing options with bank staff, ask as many questions as you can, and be sure to relate your business objectives as clearly as you can. Remember, some fees may be open to negotiation, so ask!

Online Banking. Maybe you enjoy taking a break and visiting your local branch to do your banking, but you should select a bank that offers the convenience of online banking. You can easily manage your cash and checking accounts, pay bills, handle credit card collections, manage payroll, view statements, and apply for a loan. Online banking also might result in lower, or no, fees for certain services. Be sure to examine all the services that each online banking system provides!

Incentives. Some banks offer free checks and low fees. Other banks partner with businesses to offer retail discounts, or may offer travel, hotel, and dining discounts and business travel services. If you do a lot of purchasing or traveling, incentives like those could be pretty valuable. Banks might also offer savings on loan interest rates if you are using the loan to “go green.” You may be able to get a deal on your personal accounts as a benefit. Compare the extras that your local banks offer.

Membership. Maybe the best bank for you is not a bank at all. Maybe your best financial partner is a Credit Union. While some credit unions are open only to certain businesses or industries, there are also credit unions that are open to a geographical population and that offer commercial services. At a credit union, you are more than a customer — you are a member. Credit unions were established to serve their members and often provide higher interest, lower loan rates, and minimal fees. While they have not been totally unaffected by the recent woes of the financial industry, credit unions are generally very prudent stewards of your finances and put profit into their members’ pockets rather than into the pockets of investors.

Procrastination Nation

If you have difficulty accomplishing important tasks, and you complete projects at the last possible minute or miss deadline after deadline, small changes can get the job done.

Having trouble getting things done? A study on procrastination by Dr. Piers Steel at the University of Calgary showed that a whopping 95 percent of us procrastinate occasionally and 20% procrastinate consistently. Steel has studied procrastination for a decade or more and believes we procrastinate because we are “hard-wired” to “value pleasures today more than pleasures tomorrow.” Whatever the cause, here’s what you can do about it.

Identify the source of your procrastination. Are you afraid you’ll blow a project, so you put it off until the last minute, congratulate yourself on a job done well, but think you could have done even better with more time? Do you feel that your work is never good enough for you? Are you afraid of success? Do you tend to value the short-term payoff versus the long-term reward? Do you lack a set routine or the energy to meet your goals? Understanding why we put things off allows us to begin to make a change.

Identify how you procrastinate. Some people ignore a task, hoping it will go away, especially if is intimidating. Others over- or under-estimate the amount of time a project might take. Do you substitute a less important task for the task at hand? Take the endless break? Do you get stalled on one task of a project, which leaves less time for other, equally important tasks? Do you just not know where to start? When you are aware of how you procrastinate, you can better control that behavior.

Create a productive environment. Set up a space that’s conducive to work, but do not get caught up in spending time making the workplace “perfect.” Your workplace should be low on distractions. Limit your time on e-mail and surfing the web, two of the largest modern time wasters. Do your most important work when you are at your best. Some people get more done early in the morning. Others might do their best work mid-morning or mid-afternoon. Before you quit for the day, plan a to-do list for the important items that need attention the next day. Then you’ll start with a plan in the morning.

Challenge your excuses. If you only have an hour, you can still complete a few small tasks for a project, or perhaps some piece of a larger task. Waiting for research? Ask yourself if you have enough information to make a start on a project, and then research later as needed. While it’s nice to have a tidy office, cleaning often becomes a means of procrastination rather than preparation for more important projects. If all you need is your brain, a pen and paper, or computer, and those are at hand, get started.

Take small steps. Break projects into activities, activities into smaller tasks. For example, if you need to put together marketing materials, an initial activity might be to hire a designer. That can, in turn, be broken down into tasks such as: call three associates and ask for a reference, spend no more than one hour online searching for designers, call three designers, set up meetings, etc. Then decide what tasks you will put on today’s to-do list. Each task you cross off your to-do list brings you one step closer to the final result.

Set mini-deadlines for yourself. If you are used to the agony and thrill of getting something done at the last minute, set mini-deadlines for yourself. If a project is due in four weeks, set deadlines for project tasks throughout that time period.

Eliminate distractions. Turn your e-mail notifications off. This way the ping of new e-mails won’t lure you in to checking “one” e-mail, then cleaning out your e-mail box, or surfing the web. When you need to focus, turn your cell phone off and catch up on voice mail at scheduled times. Don’t allow yourself to go off on tangents. Keep some paper handy to jot down “things I need to do” that pop into your head so you can quickly return your focus to the job at hand.

While you may never be completely cured of procrastination, you might be amazed at how much more you get accomplished with a few small changes in the way you work.

Small Business Owners: Disruptive Innovators? Could this be a period of disruptive innovation by small business owners?

Disruptive innovation is an innovation that improves products or services in unexpected ways, effecting existing markets. These innovative products and services are often offered at a lower price than similar existing products and services or to a different set of consumers. Tough economic times often bring out the best from small business professionals and can foster a period of creativity. That’s why Professor Clayton Christensen at Harvard Business School feels like this economy will have a positive effect on innovation. Small business owners have the ability to change quickly and shake things up. They can also benefit by partnering with larger businesses that may be too big or cumbersome to change quickly and may be in need of a swift change-up in technology, services, and products that small businesses can provide.

Is it Time for a Professional Business Checkup?

We seek out a professional to get a yearly physical to monitor our well-being, catch early signs of disease, and discuss what changes need to be made to remain healthy. If only our businesses were so lucky!

Hiring a professional is a smart business move. No matter the level of your experience, it is undoubtedly smart business to bring in a professional business advisor at some point in the life of your business. A business advisor will objectively assess the health of your business and help you to ascertain any areas that hold your business back as well as identify those that can build the business. Your advisor can provide you with the training to meet your goals. He or she can coach and work with you in order to help you to execute your plan, correct deficiencies, seize opportunities, and increase your chances of success. He or she can help your business to thrive.

At what point should you bring in a business advisor? Anytime, and preferably before you are in dire need of help. A business advisor can help a start-up to create a business plan, create business support systems, execute a marketing plan, secure financing, or any number of business tasks. An advisor can help more established businesses to change course to take advantage of industry trends, reorganize or retrain to achieve sales goals, reduce expenditures, improve communications, hire skilled employees, create new production processes, improve customer service and quality, and address any other business needs. Managers or owners can take advantage of an advisor's training on leadership and organizational development. For those who have purchased a business, an advisor can help smooth the transition in management. Family businesses may

need an advisor to objectively help them pass down the business from one generation to the next. Sometimes, it's simply a smart move to use an advisor as a sounding board, an objective "third party," to help you make decisions or choose initiatives.

Whatever the situation, understand your business and its needs. Although advisors can help identify needs, before you seek out the help of an advisor, it is helpful to understand what you need. Do you need management training, help in recovering receivables, introducing a new product to the marketplace, employee retention, business expansion, financial restructuring, or funding? Are you looking for an advisor solely for ideas, information, training, or advisory support? Or do you require an advisor who can be hands-on and who will implement changes? Be prepared to speak with an advisor frankly about your situation and have a handle on where your business is now — and where you would like it to go.

Hire an advisor who can meet your needs. The best place to start looking for an advisor is to ask for referrals from business associates. When seeking referrals, ask questions which can yield more information to help you make a decision. How versatile and how good a listener was their advisor? What strengths and weaknesses did the advisor bring to the table? What type of experience or advice did the advisor provide that proved invaluable? Were specific goals set and attained?

How to hire a business advisor

First, determine your needs and do some research.

Know your business. Know your current operations and your financial picture.

Determine the specific need(s) you want an advisor to address and if you need "hands-on" or "hands-off" assistance.

Get referrals from business associates. Ask questions about skills, performance, and results.

Research. Get more information about potential advisors from their websites.

Interview the candidates.

Set up appointments to learn more about advisors and their services.

Look at the advisor's credentials. Ask about their training, employment, and consulting work. Has the advisor successfully handled issues that relate to your objectives?

Ask for, and call, references. A few specific questions may help you find the best match.

Consider chemistry. Your relationship with your advisor must be one of trust, and you should be able to work closely and comfortably together.

Presentation. Is the advisor well prepared and confident? Does the advisor look and act professional?

Discuss your needs and expectations. A capable advisor should be able to understand and "frame" your issues, but should not be expected to have a solution before digging into the data.

If you need help in various areas, does the advisor have access to any specialists you may need?

Review proposals and fees carefully.

Proposals should outline achievement of clear business outcomes, not simply tasks. Training is a task. Improving sales results is an outcome.

Does the time-frame for the project appear to be well thought out and achievable, or is it unrealistic?

How does the advisor charge? Fixed-fee rates are optimal, but be sure to evaluate services covered under that rate. Hourly rates might result in a "running meter" attitude or result in a "never-ending" project. If the fee is not fixed, you should consider a cap on hours.