

What a “Green Niche” and A Little Island Inspiration Can Do

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Steve Gerson is the owner of RD FRESH, a company that is revolutionizing the way food is preserved and transported nationwide. While conservation of energy, food safety and food freshness are critical challenges faced by food-service providers the world over, it's the particular difficulties faced by isolated island resorts that inspired Steve's development of RD FRESH five years ago.

Running and growing a successful company, along with thirty years of experience in the hotel and restaurant industry, make Steve a great resource for insights on starting and owning your own business, which he recently shared with Entrepreneur Exchange:

How does someone know if they have what it takes to own their own business?

(I'd say) expertise — or the ability to gain the expertise necessary to be a professional in your business — as well as the expertise to simply run the nuts and bolts of any business. But more importantly, (you need) the confidence in the decisions you will make because, in the end, yours is the only decision that will matter.

Tell us a bit about how you made the decision to start your own business and why...

Even as an employee, I always operated from the perspective that this” (whatever my position was) was my own business. Take a waiter for example. You pay no rent, no utilities, no advertising costs, (you have) a minimal expense for uniforms and yet the reality is that you are in business for yourself... you get your own group of tables, and the extent of your income depends entirely on your professionalism and customer service.

What was the biggest challenge you faced in your first six months in business? How did you meet that challenge?

(My biggest challenge was in) not panicking, not deviating from the business model...regardless of the rejection rate. (I had to have) confidence that my decisions were correct and that the real “hurdle” was time, nothing more.

What do you think is the greatest challenge facing business owners today and why? Any suggestions for how to address those challenges?

(The critical question business owners should be asking is) “Do they have the right product or service at the right time and in the right place?” because money today is as tight as it's ever been, both for business and for the consumer. Be honest and flexible. If you don't have the right product or service (e.g. \$20 hamburgers), you need to adapt to the market — regardless of how wonderful your product or service may be and regardless of how successful it may have been in a better economy.

What is the single strongest piece of advice you would have for someone just starting out in business for themselves?

Make certain that you are comfortable on your own. If you need constant input from staff and constant oversight from management, regardless of your knowledge in the field, you should never start your own business. But once you've made the choice to begin, keep your faith in yourself...no matter how difficult the daily operations are. You can do everything right, and still not succeed through no fault of your own — never take rejection or even failure personally.

What would you say is the one thing that new business owners forget about or overlook when they're just planning / starting out?

Business plans are usually short-term models, but business isn't. Business owners need to plan on where they want to be in five years, as well as where they want to be "next" year.

What marketing strategies have you found to be most successful in growing your business?

Customer relationships...marketing yourself is equally as important as marketing the product.

What is it about the business/industry you are in that made it so attractive to you?

I looked for and found a "green" niche in an industry in which I had tremendous experience and knowledge... and then researched that niche until I was as much an expert in that field as I was in my own.

After the initial start-up phase in business, what obstacles do business owners face as they try to grow their business and remain successful? Any advice for how to overcome those obstacles?

While competition would seem the obvious obstacle, it should have been taken into account long before even starting the business. An often unseen obstacle is growth itself. There is a long list of "start-ups" that failed when their customer base became too large to produce for or too large to service. As an example, acquiring Walmart as a customer can more easily lead to failure than success for the unprepared entrepreneur.

Growing any business today is a matter of "partnering" with the right individuals, groups and companies to add to your own expertise. If you hire a plumber at home to fix your broken pipe and an electrician to hook up your new generator, why would you attempt to do everything on your own in your business?

What on-line, software or other resources have helped you the most in managing all aspects of your company? Why and how have they been helpful?

Not being an accountant, but becoming proficient enough in Quickbooks to professionally run the financial aspects of the business has been an extremely valuable management tool, as well as a huge money saver... I pay my accountant only for my year-end taxes.

What did you do before you decided to become your own boss, and how have those skills helped you in your current business?

(I was a) chef of my own very successful restaurant, food and beverage director at a number of exclusive Caribbean Resorts and a consultant to properties throughout the Caribbean. (I also) coached the 1997 Gold Medal British Virgin Islands Culinary Team and have authored a book entitled, "Contemporary Caribbean Cuisine." These "skills" have helped me in my current business (a 100% natural, "green" product designed to save energy and keep food fresher, longer) by giving me instant entrée to and credibility with the food service industry.

What process do you follow to successfully close on a lead and make the final sale? Any tips?

Follow the trail of everyone who will be involved in the decision, but start with the one who will be most closely associated with the product. Never push that first contact for an immediate close, because that person often may NOT be the decision-maker, but can always reject you immediately.

If you work from home, what are the greatest benefits to doing so? What are the drawbacks, and how do you manage them?

Keep a home office, but even if it is a \$99-per-month “suite,” keep a business office for a more professional address and to have a place to meet a client or potential client.

If you bought into an already existing business opportunity, distributorship, licensee opportunity or small franchise, how and why did you make that choice?

While I developed mine from scratch, if I were buying into one, I'd look for one as close to “ground floor” as possible, as well as one that could offer simple proof that it is a viable business...

As an example, I entered the market in January of 2008. I operate my service business entirely without contracts and have some clients who have been with us since start-up, as well as many clients who have now been with us for two years or more. Obviously, my product and business model works.

What is / are your favorite motto and / or quote when it comes to business?

Customer service...performing your tasks in a timely, courteous and professional manner is not enough to ensure success. Customer relationships are the true key!

Any final words of encouragement and / or inspiration for the budding entrepreneur?

Some of the greatest moments of my life (have been)... saying “I do,” seeing my novel in print and knowing that people are actually reading it, and enjoying the realization that I will never again have to put on a shirt and tie and go to work for a paycheck!!!

More about Steve:

Steve Gerson was a coach of the 1997 Gold Medal British Virgin Islands Culinary Team and is the author of *Contemporary Caribbean Cuisine*. He has been the head chef of his own award-winning restaurant, the food and beverage director at a number of exclusive Caribbean resorts and a consultant to a number of properties throughout the Caribbean.

Steve spent two years developing the RD FRESH concept and started his business in 2008.

Due to its outstanding success in the food preservation and transport industry thus far, RD FRESH is currently in full-growth mode and expanding the availability of its products and services nationwide.