

7 Tips For No-Hassle Business Planning

by Mike Rohan

It was Yogi Berra, the great baseball player who grew up in the Hill neighborhood in St. Louis, who said: "If you don't know where you are going, you will wind up somewhere else."

Yogi makes a great point. If you are responsible for your business success, a planning process can help you get and keep a clear focus on where you want your business to go.

But first, you need to be a little creative. Picture a boat in your mind's eye. This is your ideal boat. Can you see the details? The colors? Is it on the Pacific Ocean? Or on a river in Colorado? Is it a sailboat? A canoe? Or a power boat?

Each of you probably saw a different "ideal boat." Before you ride that boat, you must first determine what tools you will need to launch, build and maneuver that boat. In many ways, it's the same for individual businesses.

A business plan is a written document for you to operate your own special "business boat." The value of a business plan is its ability to help you:

1. Look ahead into the future.
2. Allocate money, talent and time.
3. Measure your progress, or lack of progress. Business planning is just the process that helps you stay "on point."

Here are seven tips you can use for "No Hassle" business planning. First....

1. Build your own "boat"—your plan.

If you feel you just want a bare bones, one-page plan, that's the plan you need to write and use. If you want more than that, build it using other resources described below.

2. Invest in thinking about your business—not just doing your daily work.

No one else can have the enthusiasm and vision that you have for your business. Take time to think about that business. Ongoing thinking/planning helps clarify direction and decision-making.

3. Think of business planning as a chance to look forward—not as a chore.

It's true—some surprises happen when you write down those hopes and goals. Look forward to lengthening your focus, get past the immediate and improve short- and long-term productivity.

4. Things change over time—keep moving ahead by knowing where you want the business to go.

In what direction do you want to go? In what direction are you *actually* going? What are your plans for growth? If it sometimes feels like your business is being run by everyone but you, business planning can be a great reality check.

5. Check and re-check your business image and deliverables. Ask questions—don't pass up the opportunity to learn from your customers. Be like Ed Koch, the former Mayor of New York, who constantly checked by asking his customers... "How am I doing?" Learn what is important today to your market and customers.

6. Measure to keep your business healthy.

Measure key indicators to see how you are doing. It's like blood pressure or cholesterol levels. If you don't measure often and track hard data, you might be sick, getting sicker and not realize it.

7. It's OK to ask for help. You really do have options...

If you already have a written business plan, great. Schedule planning time, review progress and update it regularly.

If you don't have a business plan...you can:

- Do it yourself. See sample plans on the Internet for successful elements, or;
- Call SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives—www.stlscore.org). They won't write the plan for you, but can give you experienced advice, or;
- Use a professional planner to do the work with/for you. There is great value to have that outside, fresh view of your business, your market, your industry.

Remember... Old Yogi Berra had it right. You do need to know where you are going. Or you may just end up somewhere else.

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