

10 things women in business should know

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This Thing called business...

Seriously, can anyone or anything truly prepare you for the rollercoaster ride of owning a business? One minute you have so much success you can barely manage it, and the next you're in the midst of a fairly humbling event called the Global Financial Crisis.

"Dynamic" is a word I often use when describing what it's like to be a woman in business. Of course some days the words are a little more, ummmmm, colourful.

I joined our family business in the early 90s and just when I think I have it all figured (as I frequently do), I'm thrown a curve ball. As I feel I'm slipping into a rut, a new challenge comes along to get my blood pumping again. And when I'm facing a frustrating change, a great new opportunity appears.

All that said, there are some things I've learned through experience that never change and are particularly important to us gals. So when I was asked by BizMaroondah to chose just ten things a woman in business should know for their Women on the Go forum, well read for yourself...

1. The glass ceiling still exists – don't fight it, use it.

I marched through my university days as a loud advocate for highlighting the female perspective in history and literature. At the time I thought I was changing the world, but I don't think as many people were listening as I imagined. Have you read my Honours thesis on the depiction of birth control in the press? Hmmm, no, I didn't think so.

I was somewhat shocked to enter the workforce and discover that in spite of more than 100 years of female emancipation I wasn't the "equal" I assumed I would be. I just expected from my research, that the glass ceiling had been shattered in the 70s, the glass splinters mixed with the ashes from a host of burnt bras. Nope. Especially not in the world of finance.



I remember attending a budget briefing luncheon a year after I'd started working. I was filled with all the usual confidence of a twenty-something who knows everything, dressed in my navy power-suit, and excited to be mixing with my peers. Over lunch the chap sitting next to me asked all about my business, the strategies I was recommending for my clients, and my thoughts on the budget ramifications. I was dizzy with sublime affirmation because a successful and experienced businessman was interested in *my* opinions.

At the end of the session, we shook hands and as I expressed polite pleasure in meeting him, he leaned in (still holding my hand) and whispered "The pleasure was all mine, I very much enjoyed looking at your legs all afternoon."

Ouch, I found out the glass ceiling was very much intact the hard way – by hitting my head firmly against it!

The business experience *is* different for women than it is for men, and anyone who tries to tell you differently is naïve or just plain wrong. We're a statistical oxymoron – the majority minority.

Aside from the fact that I'm quite sure men secretly get more hours in their day than we do, we have to work harder and we have to be better. The good news is that they're actually pretty good traits to have when running a business.

I'm the only female owner of my business, and I have definitely had to work harder and differently to the 3 male owners.

When I started out my glass ceiling was coke-bottle thick. Not only was I a woman (with a great set of pins, apparently), but I was trying to give advice about money and finance. Tough gig.

In the early years I took it personally and let it negatively affect my business, not to mention my self-esteem. Not cool. But then I made a deliberate decision to turn things around. I acknowledged the difference, and worked with it instead of against it. I made some significant changes to the way I did business and importantly, found my female edge

The difference itself doesn't hold us back, it's only when we refuse to see it (admittedly glass is transparent), or when we don't make the necessary changes to accommodate it that it becomes an impediment. If anything, the difference should inspire you to dig deep and determine what is unique about your style of business, and use that to find your competitive advantage. Use it to be better. To be the best.

2. You need to start with the end in mind

This is a little something I learned from business guru Michael Gerber (if you haven't read *The E-Myth*, you should). When we start out in business we expect to be in it for the long-term right? We have goals. Some of them loftier than others. One important goal that's often neglected is how we want it to end.

If you're planning a trip you need to know where you're going before you can plan the route yeah?

In order to achieve any goal you need to set it, visualise it, and plan for it. This includes ultimately exiting your business.

I love what I do, I'm only in my 40's so a fair way from retirement, but I have an exit strategy from my business. Now, there may be some tweaking along the way, but I know approximately when I want to be able to move out of the business, I know how I want the business to look when I do it, and I know what I want to do afterward.



As business owners we take significant risks on board, in anticipation that we'll be duly rewarded in the future. For most of us, we expect the prize to come in retirement (with some lifestyle rewards along the way of course), but it doesn't just magically happen. We have to plan for it.

Do you want to sell your business for a profit? Are you hoping to cease the physical work, but remain a shareholder with a regular income? Will you simply wind down the business? Do you want a family member or staff member to succeed you?

Time and time again business owners are surprised to find themselves being forced to sell their business for a much reduced value, unable to find a buyer, winding down a business they hoped to sell, or without appropriate succession, because they didn't begin with the end in mind and work towards it.

Starting with the end in mind helps you build not only the type of business you want, but also the business you need to reach your ultimate goals.

3. Know why you're in business and know when to get out



Obviously we all have our personal reasons for choosing to be self-employed and it's important to be able to articulate these reasons.

For me, I like the autonomy. I don't like being told what to do and I know everything.

Also, I need the flexibility because I have a family, and I don't always work best in 8 hour set blocks of time.

Best of all, I get to work from home two days per week - in my pink fluffy dressing gown if I so desire. I figure not many employers would allow that as part of their dress code.

So why are *you* in business? There's no right or wrong answer, but by recognising your particular motivation, you're more likely to achieve your business goals and enjoy what you do.

If you're in business to make money, **don't apologise.** Women may be socially conditioned to be nurturers rather than capitalists, but we're just as entitled to focus on the money as anyone else.

One of my pet hates is attending presentations where the audience is asked why they're in business, and the *correct* answer is "to help people."

First up, no one tells me why *I'm* in business, that's my prerogative. Secondly, at this stage in my life and career I need my business to be profitable. I'm very lucky that my business *is* helping people and that I do it very well, but I make no apologies about my need to make money and pay my way.

Being in business so that you can balance your family and financial commitments is also valid. You may not be in business to make bucketloads of money, and that's ok too.

Again, don't make any apologies, be proud that your family is your priority.

Hey, you might just want something to do – and guess what – that's completely valid too.

But a word of caution – if your business is losing money year after year, then you don't have a business you have an expensive hobby. And unless you're in business to support an expensive hobby, then it's time to walk away and try something else.

So be honest with yourself about why you're in business. Don't waste valuable energy pretending to be something you're not, or striving for something you think you *should* want, but actually don't...



4. YOU CAN DO IT!

What do you really want most for your business?

The great news is that you can have it – exactly what you want most. It may mean difficult sacrifices, significant effort, and a lot of time, but you can do it.

However, if you're not prepared to make the necessary sacrifices or put in the required effort then own it, find peace with it, and change your goal.

Don't persist dreaming about something unless you're prepared to do whatever's necessary to make it happen. That's not a cheap shot; it's a fact. Why set yourself up for failure? Just trade your goal for something more realistic, and move on.

On the other hand, if what you want most to achieve is commensurate with the requisite sacrifices, effort, and time then go do it. Set some realistic goals and start making it happen today.

5. Learn from those who have already succeeded

Unashamedly, I love motivational guru Tony Robbins. Tony counsels that regardless of your objective, you should learn from people who have already succeeded. He says "Mastery in any area requires immersion, dedication, and modelling those who are already outstanding."

He uses losing weight as an example. Rather than partnering with someone else who's struggling with their weight, you should look to people you know who have already successfully made diet and exercise changes.

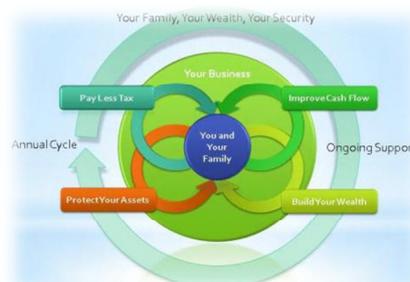
Actively seek out other business women (or men!) that you'd like to emulate and learn their secrets and their mistakes. Why reinvent the wheel?

We may own a family business out in the burbs, but we only model our systems and procedures on businesses that are more successful than ours. In fact, I'm proud to say we've won awards on the premise that we run a corporatised service without compromising our personal service and family values.

I regularly spend time learning from business owners who have already made a success of practices I'd like to implement at our firm. If this means travelling - I get on a plane, if it means an investment of time and/or money - I make it, if it means reciprocating the favour - I make myself available.



6. Advice pays



This leads me to the value of professional advice.

We've all heard the saying "good advice doesn't cost, it pays", well to use another cliché, "ne'er a truer word was spoken."

If you really think you can't benefit from advice then you probably shouldn't be in business.

The best people in business learn from others.

It's important to accept that some people know better than we do. More importantly we have to be prepared to listen, as well as take criticism.

I've found in all my years of business that most women are great at seeking advice, but not so great at actually taking the advice. Why is that? Why are we so bad at taking advice, especially when we could be so much better off?

I could make some smart alec or self deprecating remarks, but I actually don't know the answer to the question. What I do know is that for the most part, our male counterparts love handing over problems to experts and letting them solve them while they get on with running their business.

Advice can take many forms depending upon your industry and the type of work you do. But if you're even a semi serious businesswoman you should make sure you have a great tax expert. When you're in business you absolutely do not want to be paying more tax than you have to – that's just wasting money!

Also, you can't afford to have someone that just prepares and lodges your return each year, you need someone that can identify business and financial issues for you as well. I'm talking about other key areas like asset protection, estate planning, insurances, business structures, super contributions, debt management etc. If your Accountant's not talking to you about these things then you need to make a change. Don't think about it, do it because it's what you *need*. And you need to do it now. Hmmmmm, as it happens, I know of a really great firm in Croydon that can take care of you...

If you're looking to grow your business, then you might really benefit from some business consulting to improve your profitability. This might include advice on structures to protect the wealth you've already accumulated, cashflow management, tax planning, system efficiencies, reporting (and then how to use the reports to significantly improve your business), staffing, and diversification.

Yes you'll need to make a financial investment in this advice, but the return should be significant if the advice is sound.

7. Networking works

I'm not talking about randomly handing out your card hoping one day someone will call. Nor am I suggesting you should corner someone and bore them to tears about yourself and your business.

It's about having a two-way conversation that's mutually beneficial. A conversation whereby you're able to learn about the other person's needs and *then* let them know how they could benefit from working with you. The emphasis has to be on them; it's not about you.



And of course, networking works well the other way too – it might be you that can be helped. Having that two-way conversation is a great way to meet those outstanding business men and women from whom you can learn. People in business are often very generous when you show genuine interest in learning from them.

8. Be prepared to make tough decisions

One of the hardest lessons I had to learn in business was that what made me feel good and what was good for the business were not always the same thing.

The most obvious example is often letting people go who aren't a good fit for your business.



In the late 90s, I employed a staff member that I genuinely liked. She was a lovely person but she made mistake after mistake, and was not good for business. I let it go on for almost two years before finally letting her go. I was so upset that day that I side-swiped a concrete pillar in our car park.

These days I don't make those tough decisions any more lightly, but I do make them a lot more quickly. If there is a person or a system that's hurting my business, then a business decision needs to be made, not a personal one. This extends to anyone you might deal with in business whether it's staff, suppliers, sales reps...

In most cases, the way you feel personally and the right decision for your business won't be mutually exclusive. In times when you are faced with a tough decision, don't shy away from it, and review points 3, 4, and 5!

9. Believe in yourself

No, no, not the rah rah self-help stuff, that's not my specialty. I'm talking about your practical belief in your ability as a businesswoman.

If you've gone into business it's because you have such a great expertise in an area that you're willing to take risks and make sacrifices most people are not. So don't waste non-productive energy second guessing yourself or your decisions.

Don't worry, I'm not contradicting my comments on professional advice or emulating outstanding business people, but if a taxi driver is giving you advice, and your business is *not* driving taxis, then smile politely and forget it.

When you own a business everyone wants to tell you how you can do it better yeah? It's really quite insulting.

I drive a Volvo and people regularly feel the need to question my choice of automobile. They love to tell me what I could have bought / should have bought, not to mention the snide remarks about my lack of taste. But it's all ok because I'm completely certain that my Volvo Sports is the ideal car for me. I'm the only one that truly knows what I need in a car, I was the one that did the research, I'm the expert in my vehicular needs. No second guessing.



Have you ever had someone question the way you raise or discipline your children? It's soooooo frustrating. Interestingly, we hardly ever give much credibility to the advice, because we believe in ourselves as the expert of raising our children.

If you believe in yourself and your expertise, then back yourself all the way. If you don't, then get out of the business and find something else.



10. Be ethical

Everything our parents taught us about manners and morals is vital in business.

Remember:

- Cheats never prosper
- You catch more flies with honey than vinegar
- Treat others as you wish to be treated yourself

Treating your clients or customers with respect and genuine care is a highly profitable business practice. It comes back to you three-fold (no I'm not providing a statistic for that statement), and is quite simply, good business.

Most people don't choose who they deal with based on technical expertise – that's just an expectation. At the end of the day, we choose to do business with people we like and trust. People don't buy what we do, they buy us.

This is never more important than when you make a mistake or sell something that's defective. Every business makes mistakes, it's how you deal with it that matters.

Not too long ago my business realised that we'd make an admin error for one of our clients. The same day that we identified the error, we called to tell him about the mistake and how we were going to fix it.

His first response was to thank us for telling him because he said he would never have known otherwise and that other firms might have just swept it under the carpet.

We told him that was never an option, to which he replied "I know, and that's why I'll always do my business with you."

What a testament.

There's a famous line from the movie Wall Street, "Greed is good." Don't ever get seduced by this mentality or the trappings of easy success; it all comes back to bite you. In my opinion, you can only benefit – financially and personally - by running a business with strong values.

10.1 Protect yourself, your family, your business

Finally, and most importantly, all this information is *absolutely worthless* if you don't have a protection strategy in place.

If your family's lifestyle would be significantly impacted if something happened to you, or your business, or your partner, then you need a financial protection strategy in place. If you don't, it could undermine absolutely everything you've worked so hard for and much worse.

Don't risk having the financial rug pulled out from underneath you – be prepared.



In a nutshell

1. Being a woman in business means you need to work harder and be better – don't fight it, use it.
2. An exit strategy needs to be defined if you want to be sure to achieve your end goals.
3. There are many reasons to own a business, just make sure you understand and you're true to *your* reason.
4. You can have whatever you want so long as you're prepared to make the necessary sacrifices. If you're not, that's ok, but don't keep chasing an unrealistic dream. Change your goal
5. The best friends you can make in business are those who've already achieved outstanding success. They're not your competition, they're your mentors.
6. An investment in good advice could pay huge dividends.
7. Don't kid yourself that simply handing out your card will bring you business (certainly not the business you're targeting). It has to be a two way conversation with mutual benefit.
8. Don't stick your head in the sand. When your personal feelings are at odds with your business interests, be objective and don't be afraid to make tough decisions.
9. Being in business for yourself is a risk you'd never take unless you were completely confident in your expertise. If you're not the expert, then get out and find something else to do.
10. Old fashioned values and morals are definitely still in vogue when it comes to profitable and ethical business.



10.1. Make sure you protect yourself against unforeseen events. Don't risk losing everything you've worked for because you were unprepared.

Building a successful business – and we each have our own definition of success – can be incredibly fulfilling. After all, we wouldn't do it if the potential reward didn't outweigh the risks. When I first started out in business I thought I was changing the world. The ten tips I've outlined may not quite do that, but they may change your business.

Good luck and enjoy!

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