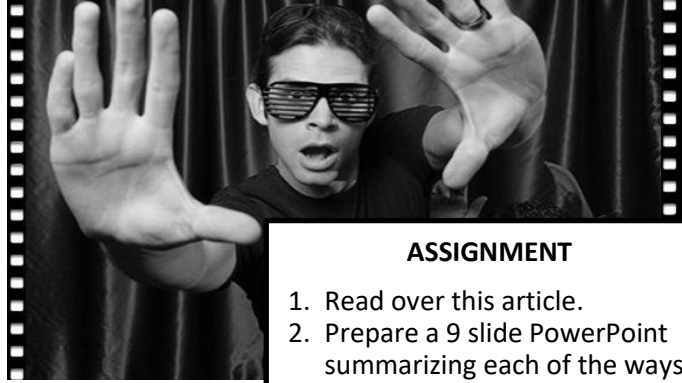


Nine Steps To Start And Grow A Creative Small Business

Imagine a job where you get to dress people in funny costumes and take pictures of them, then spend the rest of the day shopping for fake mustaches, feather boas, and garden gnomes. Chances are you'd laugh a lot and never want to quit your job. That is the idea behind Lucky Laughter Photo Booth, a family business started by Jaclyn Friedlander and her husband Tim Riese. Jaclyn is a master at bringing fun and creativity to work. In her other business, Friends with Fins, she writes books and creates YouTube videos about ocean conservation for children. Tim also views the world through a creative lens in his day job as a photographer and television camera operator. Though Lucky Laughter is not their only business, they'll soon be ready to make it their full-time gig. With two years under their belt, they have good advice to offer people who want to shake up their 9-to-5 routines.



ASSIGNMENT

1. Read over this article.
2. Prepare a 9 slide PowerPoint summarizing each of the ways to start a creative business. INCLUDE AN EXAMPLE ON EACH SLIDE OF HOW YOUR BUSINESS CAN USE THESE.
3. Email/share.

1. Find an idea and go for it

Business ideas can come from anywhere. In the case of the Lucky Laughter Photo Booth, it came from attending a wedding that had an enclosed photo booth. Jaclyn and Tim liked the booth and immediately thought of ways they could improve on the idea. Tim's background in photography made it a perfect fit for them. Naming their company was a bit more challenging. "We had several ideas for clever photo related names that were so clever they were already taken. We wanted something positive and liked the alliteration of Lucky Laughter." It's a fitting name, as their customers spend a lot of time laughing, and they feel very lucky to be a part of the fun. If your idea bank is running a negative balance, start a daily practice of generating ideas. Look for problems that need solving. Read books on creativity. Ask yourself 'what if' questions, your answers could help generate your new business idea.

2. Profit from what you know

Jaclyn is a freelance children's book writer and conservation activist. She developed strong marketing skills while promoting her books. This gave her an edge in finding their first gig. Her husband Tim is a cinematographer and camera operator for television. He used his skills to develop the open photo booth concept, find the right software and network with set designers. "My husband was able to figure out exactly what we needed for the photo booth, and I was able to use my skills in marketing," says Jaclyn. Though your skills and interests can help lead you to the right business choice, you don't have to be an expert in the business you want to open. You can hire expertise, partner with an expert, or get training in your chosen field.

3. Don't hire your best friend

"Don't hire your best friend unless they have skills or experience that suits your business," advises Jaclyn. "Job fit is first and foremost. Though getting along and having fun is important, you have to make sure that the person you hire can do the job. "In our small business, that means being able to handle the hectic pace, while taking quality photos, managing the hardware and software and maintaining the same level of quality that we do when we work the event," says Jaclyn. "Work should be fun. The more you enjoy what you're doing, the more people will enjoy participating." Start by creating a list of the skills or experience your future employee needs to do the job. You'll find helpful forms and templates in Microsoft Word. Select File>New and type Hire into the search box. On the right hand side, filter the templates by selecting Small Business from the Category list.

4. Don't let your customers starve for attention

"Customer service is the life or death of any small business. We get so much business from word of mouth, if we didn't pay attention to customer service, we'd lose money. If you don't have good phone etiquette or customers aren't happy, it will end before you even get started. I never want our customers to reach a robot voice that says 'we're helping other customers.' They need a personal response." You can learn from any interaction with your customers, even a negative one. In fact, how you handle

negative reviews can positively influence your business. Read *Five ways to calm your worst customers* for tips on how to manage customer feedback.

5. A business plan is like a map through the dark forest

While there are plenty of urban legends about companies who bootstrapped their business without a plan, there are even more businesses that faltered because they didn't know where they were going. Jaclyn's father suggested a template for a business plan from Microsoft Word. Jaclyn combined parts of the Microsoft plan she liked with a plan from SCORE. SCORE is a non-profit business that helps small businesses through education and mentorship.

6. Color outside the lines

How do you compete with similar businesses? You need to zig when they zag, samba when they tango and definitely never follow the crowd. Though there are tried and true pillars for any prosperous business, such as customer service (#3) and having a business plan (#4), there are no rules for the rest of your business. Jaclyn set out to make their business different from the start. For instance, most other photo booth businesses drop off a closed booth for a DIY event. Instead, Lucky Laughter has an open photo booth that allows their customers to wander through custom sets and include large groups in specialized settings. Once they used a giant bed with red velvet drapes as the set. Research your competitors to know what you need to do differently. Read their Yelp reviews, their websites and their Facebook pages. Study their reviews and testimonials. What do their customers like and what would they like to change?

7. Chatter in all the right places

Even though you are most likely aware of social media, you might not have taken the plunge, thinking that it isn't for you. However, research shows that social media is influencing purchase decisions at higher rates¹. That doesn't mean that you need to start blogging, tweeting, pinning and posting to every social media tool available. Experiment to find the best channels for your business. If one avenue doesn't garner fans, likes and leads, try another. "Our Instagram and Twitter accounts don't produce as many leads for us as Facebook and Yelp. We don't do Facebook ads, but it still generates leads. We have a hosted online album on our Facebook page, so people will see pictures from an event there, and the next week we are inundated with leads," says Jaclyn. "We also occasionally put out videos on YouTube.

8. Focus on the first sale, the rest will follow

At the start of your business, you anxiously watch your inbox, wait by the phone or stare at the front door hoping for that first client. The voices in your head that tell you this won't work can be silenced by that first sale or booking. Or at least the loudest ones. "Depending on your business model, if you do take on an investor, allocate the investment towards getting that first client. Once you have the first one, getting others is easier, but it's the first one that's the challenge," says Jaclyn. Jaclyn got their first client by putting out flyers. Lucky Laughter had their first gig within a month. Jaclyn didn't just stand on a street corner and hand out flyers. She put up a Yelp page, posted her flyers on local community boards, put an ad on Craigslist and created a Facebook page. She used multiple channels to find business. "Our first gig was exciting. I was stressed out and Tim was cool as a cucumber. But at the end, everyone was happy and we had even more material to use for marketing. We thought, we did it and now we can do anything. In the book *Poke the Box*, Seth Godin advises just starting, even if you don't feel perfectly ready. Sometimes it's better to get it imperfectly right than perfectly wrong. You'll make mistakes, but that's the best way to learn. Focus on the first sale and let what you learn lead to the next.

9. Get help from your friends, family, partnerships and SCORE

SCORE's resources for small businesses have helped Lucky Laughter succeed. "It's always great to have a sounding board, someone who can help you take your business one step further. SCORE's classes are reasonably priced, so you don't feel you are taking away from the business to try to grow the business," says Jaclyn. In addition to getting help from SCORE, Jaclyn and Tim called on the expertise of friends and family, most significantly Jaclyn's father, who has a background in marketing at a large corporation. Partnerships with other businesses are another key factor in building their business. "We find that our relationships with event planners and venues are super valuable. We are always looking for companies big and small to work with. Even businesses like auto dealers and real estate agents have helped us. We never know where our next great partnership will come from so we stay open to new ideas, conversations and opportunities." Don't underestimate the power of connections. Few small businesses would get off the ground without help from their friends.