

There Are No 'One Size Fits All' Solutions in Business

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There's no shortage of business "experts" out there telling us business owners what we must do to succeed. But before following generic advice, ask yourself if it really makes sense for your business.

There are times I wish I could be like Amy Poehler on "Saturday Night Live's" Weekend Update when she and Seth Meyer do their "Really!?! " routine. I'm especially moved to "be Amy" when I hear people tell small business owners what to do as if you're one monolithic group with the same needs, challenges, and skill sets.

Sure, there are plenty of areas we can get near unanimous agreement among entrepreneurs. Who among us wouldn't want easier access to capital, more free time, and a hard-working, problem-free staff? But when it comes to other issues, solutions that may be ideal for some business owners may not necessarily work for others.

For instance, many business pundits proclaim that, after financing, the biggest issue business owners have is marketing. Really!?! If the questions sent to me here at my AllBusiness.com "Ask the Expert" podcast are any barometer, for the last six months or so your biggest concerns have been HR and staffing issues. Now that the economy is rebounding, maybe your marketing concerns will rise to the top, but for now you're all about salaries, vacation pay, and "How can I fire this person?"

A new, nearly universal claim is "every small business owner needs to blog." Really!?! Don't get me wrong; I get why blogs are important. Writing them is a big part of my own income. But those are my areas of expertise: writing and dispensing small business advice.

I'm also a voracious consumer of blogs. Every day I read blogs about big business, small business, media, and politics (my areas of interest). I'll even admit to checking in with notorious gossip Perez Hilton on his blog. But truthfully (and I mean no disrespect) I don't really care what my dry cleaner has to say. I don't have the time or interest to see what my favourite restaurant is up to or to read style tips from my hair stylist. I don't know if my accountants have blogs; I know my lawyer does not (they're all small business owners). My IT person isn't blogging, nor is my gardener.

One reason I'm an "every business owners needs a blog" doubter is, well, not everyone can write. And if you can't communicate well, your poorly executed blog is going to reflect on the overall assessment your customers have of your business. But even more important than your writing and communication skills, consider how busy consumers are today. They're pressed to keep up with the information they need to do their jobs and ease their lives. They're reading blogs to stay on top of the news, their industries, and just

the stuff they're interested in. Most aren't going to seek out the blogs of businesses they frequent just because they're customers or clients.

If you think blogging will help you call attention to what you're doing, in some cases you might be right. In other cases, Twitter would be a much more effective method of communicating with loyal customers and finding new ones. If you own a store or restaurant, invite your customers to follow you on Twitter for daily, weekly, or monthly specials. Ramon DeLeon, a partner in several Dominos franchises in Chicago, told me (actually, we had a Twitter conversation about it) that he promotes his Twitter account "all over my marketing pieces and on store signage." A friend told me about bagel store in L.A. with a 10-foot long sign announcing "Follow us on Twitter."

By now you know it's smart business to put your Twitter name on your business cards. (Of course, this presumes you've joined Twitter.) But you can be like Ramon DeLeon and put it all over your marketing materials and your place of business. You can also put it on your invoices, receipts, and other paperwork that customers see. Use Twitter to push your specials, new arrivals, or latest discounts. I may never read a blog from my dry cleaner or local restaurant, but I am very interested in hearing about a Thursday afternoon discount or that kids eat free on Tuesday nights.

So the next time you hear or read that all small business owners should do this or that, think about how -- or even *if* -- the effort is a good use of your time and money. If it doesn't, channel your inner Amy and just ask, "Really!?!"