

Success in the 21st Century Do You Have What It Takes?

In a few years we will have crossed that much-heralded bridge to the 21st century. Once on the other side, there will be new challenges, but many of the secrets of succeeding in independent business will remain the same. Ask yourself the following questions to see how you measure up to these old-and-new standards of entrepreneurial excellence:

Are you in step with technology? The 21st century will usher in a brave new world of marketing and financial transactions. The successful independent business person will be in touch with opportunities offered by technology for one-to-one marketing. For example, instead of advertising in print and on radio or TV, businesses can target and reach customers far more directly--through their personal computers.

Marketing on-line will be closely aligned with electronic monetary transactions. This phenomenon will have myriad repercussions on everybody from checkbook printers to the U.S. Postal Service. Many concepts, such as discounts for prompt payment, will cease to have meaning as electronic transactions will narrow and then obliterate the time-lag between receivables and payables. Savvy owners and managers will be prepared themselves now to sign onto these new ways of doing business.

Are you flexible? A recent survey of successful small business operations revealed that 54 percent of respondents named flexibility as one of the secrets to their success. Today's great product or service could well be obsolete tomorrow, as it becomes increasingly difficult to forecast the competitive environment, new developments in technology, and consumer trends. Success in the next millennium doesn't just mean riding the tide of change; it means being the first to get to shore.

And when you refuse to be flexible? Consider this classic bad example from the world of big business: Apple Computer's failure to foresee the wisdom of licensing rights to its Mac operating system. This failure in flexibility opened the door--and Windows--for Microsoft, thus initiating its own decline.

Are you focused? Flexibility must be balanced with focus. The readiness to expand or diversify should never threaten the "heart" of the business. As the winds of change blow stronger, knowing the true strengths of a business and having a keen sense of its niche value is essential.

Here's a good once-small-business example of focus: Krispy Kreme Doughnuts, the North Carolina-based company that began with one small shop in 1942. It's going stronger than ever with new franchises all over the country, and has seals-of-approval from The New Yorker and other trend-setting publications. Ignoring the concept of multibranding, Krispy Kreme sells only its trademark doughnuts, and they are (literally) hot.

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Do you have a plan? The key to balancing between too flexible and too rigid is a good business plan. Although rapid change may make a five-year plan too long-range, the length of vision is not as important as its intensity. The chief value of a business plan is the hard thinking that it engenders. Planning forces business owners and managers to face issues head-on, examining closely the virtues versus the pitfalls of whatever next steps the business might take.

Although the good business plan will contain, in writing, goals that are specific, realistic, measurable, and time-driven, this document will mean nothing without the correct entrepreneurial spirit behind it. Successful business owners live by their goals. This has never been more important than it will be in an age where variables increase exponentially in every possible area--new competitive products and services, technological advances, industry trends and changes.

Are you prepared for your "next life"? Once you've made it into the land of the successful (or you're tired of trying to get there), what next? One of the signs of a wise entrepreneur is knowing when to make a graceful exit. Business owners who believe they should consider selling only when business is down are missing another opportunity to be a winner. Good timing is the secret to selling success. Instead of waiting for bad times, either in the business itself or in the marketplace in general, sellers should understand that the year 2000 might be too late.

A professional business broker can make selling an educated process, doing everything from accessing national and international data bases for marketplace information, to advertising and qualifying buyers, to handling the complex paperwork necessary for the completion of the sale. The business broker will also present and assess offers and, at the appropriate juncture, will help in structuring the sale and negotiating its close.

Even if exiting your business is a step you won't take until the next millennium, it's not too soon to create a strategic exit plan. After overcoming the challenges of making a business successful, the final triumph for the owner is profiting from its successful sale.