

Developing a Profitable and Sustainable Stress Management Business:

10 Things You Don't Need To Be Successful

This is the first of a series of articles I'm planning to write for ISMA News about business development. The articles are based on my business experience, so are personal and based on my own views and opinions. I've been in the business of stress management since 1996 and in that time I've made just about every business and marketing mistake possible. Some were extremely costly in both the financial and emotional sense! I hope to help you avoid those unnecessary and avoidable costs.

I should add that I don't regret making mistakes per se. The worst mistake you can make in business is not to try or test things, especially when it comes to marketing. (I'll have a lot more to say about marketing in future articles.)

This article is about those things I've come to believe that you *don't* need to be successful in business. I wish I knew about these things when I started out in stress management. It would have saved me tens of thousands of pounds and a lot of stress and anxiety.

Minimising costs is so incredibly important when you start, and much more than you realise when you're in that warm glow of starting your business. The more money you can save (or not spend), the more you can invest in growing your business for the longer-term. Also, financial worries induce chronic stress and put huge strain on relationships. You don't need that while you are trying to grow your business.

Some of my 'don't need' items you may find surprising or even controversial. For each one, I'll do my best to give you a rationale for *why* you don't need them.

Here's my list of the 10 things you don't need to be successful in the stress management business:

- 1. Web developers or designers**
- 2. A business plan**
- 3. A loan**
- 4. Qualifications**
- 5. Advertising**
- 6. Premises**
- 7. Employees**
- 8. Expensive software**
- 9. The latest communications technology**
- 10. A new car**

What you don't need 1: web developers and designers

There really was only one place to start; web developers and designers. There really is no limit to how much money and time you can waste on them. I've

made some catastrophically stupid mistakes in this area. And more than once, which shows how stupid they really were (and I am!).

Also, I've seen friends, colleagues and clients make the same mistakes. And what really, *intensely*, annoys me is all the good people who have been exploited by web developers and designers.

I'm not saying they're all bad, but remember it's in their interest to have you believe: they're indispensable (they're not); you couldn't do it yourself (you could); websites are too technically complex for mere mortals to understand (they aren't), and; you couldn't put together a website that looks good (you could).

Let me state this as clearly as I can. **You do need a website**. It's pivotal to your marketing. But you *don't* need web developers any more. I haven't used one for several years.

That's because there are now free web development tools available that make it ridiculously easy to build websites. The tool I use is called ***weebly***. (At the end of this article I've provided a link to a page on my website where I list a number of tools like weebly that I recommend for minimising the cost of business development).

I have developed several websites with weebly and I use it every day. What I like about it is that you don't need to have any 'techy' tendencies whatsoever to build your website. For me, it has completely eradicated the need for a web designer or developer, which of course dramatically reduces my costs (and stress!).

Also, because your website is so critically important to your business, you should in any case have a high degree of control over its development. **Never, ever, let someone else have total control over your domains or website**. I have seen nightmare scenarios where unscrupulous web developers have essentially held their clients to ransom or, even worse, deliberately sabotaged their efforts to make changes. At the very minimum, you need to make sure you have ownership of your domains and know how your website works, so that you can make changes when you want to. It's an area where an element of 'control freakery' in business is a genuine virtue.

Don't let this happen to you. Develop your own websites.

What you don't need 2: A business plan

I am firmly of the opinion that you don't need a business plan, but that you do need to think about certain key business questions on an ongoing basis.

I can just about remember writing a business plan. It was a long time ago (when banks lent money to small businesses) and I can't remember what was in it. I do remember that it took up a lot of time with spreadsheets and bold cash projections, and graphs with arrows inexorably rising relative to the x-axis. It

was a work of total fiction and in no way predicted how the business actually developed.

There are circumstances when you *might* need a business plan, the main one being when you're seeking finance (which I wouldn't recommend anyway in the current climate – see 'don't need 3').

What you do need in my opinion is to think about certain fundamentally important business development questions on an ongoing basis. I'll talk more about these questions in a later article. Those questions are:

- **What** are you selling? (What you're *not* selling is also important)
- **Why** that / those things?
- **Who** are you selling to?
- **How?** What processes are you currently following to find prospects and turn them into clients?

These business questions above are always valid.

What you don't need 3: A loan

Okay, you might not get a loan anyway in the current climate; banks are highly risk averse because of bad lending in the past. But I strongly recommend growing your business *without* external finance in any case.

Why? Firstly, self-financing and growing your business organically is a great discipline. It forces you to be frugal and live within your means. Even better, it forces you to think creatively and be smart, especially when it comes to marketing. In my experience, the best marketing costs the least money. Time, effort, hard work? Definitely, all those things. But not much money. And when the business grows and becomes more financially successful, you'll know that growth is real and sustainable. It's very satisfying.

Secondly, starting out with a loan can lead quickly to bad habits. I've seen it and lived it. When I first started my first company (with partners back in the late 90s), we got a business loan. We then paid ourselves a salary that later, painfully, we realised was unsustainable. We had been kidding ourselves, fooled by the 'apparent' money in the bank. In the meantime, we built up other debts and overheads, including a large lease. It was a very hard landing. Ultimately the business survived, but its growth was severely delayed by our lack of financial discipline and bad decision making.

You don't need a loan. Grow the business organically, debt free. As you grow, invest in the business and/or pay off debts. It's the best way and the least stressful. If you need to, build the business up gradually and keep the day-job in the meantime. It makes sense in the current climate.

What you don't need 4: Qualifications

I should qualify this straight away. I don't want to give the impression that qualifications aren't a good thing. Of course they are. They show that you know what you're talking about, that you've learned your craft. Marketing-wise, they can give you authority and credibility, which helps, especially when you're selling your own services.

But you don't need qualifications to be successful in business. Success is much more related to attitudes, skills and behaviours than qualifications. **The biggest challenge by far in business is getting the business**. If you can do that, you'll be successful – in *any* business. That's about sales and particularly about marketing.

Many professional people fail early on to grasp this fundamental aspect of business. They think that if you have the right qualifications, get business cards printed and set up a website, somehow business will 'happen' and more to the point, keep happening. It doesn't work like that.

Things can seem to be going well at the start, because we get referrals from friends and former colleagues. But this honeymoon period can only last so long. Without some effective business development process to produce a 'pipeline' of clients, business dries up and we're left with the painful reality of no income for the foreseeable future. Even if we start getting to grips with marketing at this 'crisis' point, the lead-time (6-18 months if you sell to organisations) means a long wait. And actually getting paid takes even longer.

Qualifications won't solve this kind of problem. What you do need to do right from the start is some smart, low cost marketing. You need to have a **business development process** which generates leads, that in time you can convert into paying clients.

What you don't need 5: Advertising

Not only is advertising expensive, it just doesn't work in our kind of business. And the most useless kind of advertising of all is **advertising in directories of any kind**. Beware the smooth-talking telesales people in the advertising industry. They're well trained and very cunning indeed. They will have you believe they represent some public body and engage you in very pleasant conversation, appearing oh-so-interested in your excellent services. They're not, they're trying to sell you advertising in their directory. You have been warned!

Similarly useless and even more eye-wateringly expensive is the following scenario.... You're lured into parting with large sums of money by some persuasive telephone salesperson who promises you a short cut to that much cherished meeting with the Group HR Director of Corporate Megabucks at some HR 'Summit'? Yes, I've fallen for that one too (but not more than once!). This scenario is typical of many completely useless, sales-driven, marketing short cuts.

They don't work, they never will. The rule is: If they clearly have a large and well-trained sales apparatus, don't give them the time of day. Because that's all it is, a sales operation (and think about how much that costs). Don't get drawn in to the conversation or their very clever, open questions. Be assertive and PUT THE PHONE DOWN. And if the word 'summit' enters from stage left, depart at speed from stage right. OK?

Compare this scenario with organising *your own event*, hosted by a large organisation, which provides (and pays for) the venue space and refreshments, where you're the main or only speaker, which attracts 100 people you already know are interested in what you have to say. This takes time and effort and perhaps a little skill to make happen, but very little cash outlay and has an incredible return-on-investment. I'll have more to say about this highly effective form of marketing in another article. But suffice to say, events like this are a key part of my marketing strategy.

By and large advertising is completely useless unless you are 'growing a brand' and have a lot of money to throw at it. I'm guessing you probably don't and neither do I.

Good marketing is not about spending the most money. There aren't short cuts. You need to do it, but in a smart way. And yes it takes time, and yes it's hard work (sorry, but that's how it is). In fact, having *less* money to spend on marketing can be a genuine advantage, because it forces you to *think*, to be innovative, creative and strategic with your marketing.

What you don't need 6: Premises

Obviously it depends on the kind of service you offer, but often you don't need office space or a fancy address. When I formed my first stress management company with three partners, we thought, or rather kidded ourselves, we needed a smart Edinburgh West End address and took out an extended lease for a large office space with a training room and several smaller rooms.

It was an expensive mistake and nearly killed the business before it really began. We tried renting the extra space to therapists and used the training room a few times. But we learned very quickly that you just don't need that kind of space. Large organisations have their own facilities and want you to go *to them*, and if you want to run a public event, there are any number of competitively priced options. This is also true of meeting rooms.

You're in a great position to exploit this competitive and flexible market. Many organisations have excellent rooms that they will hire by the hour, and not just hotels. Public and voluntary sector organisations are worth checking out as are membership organisations, universities and colleges. Some of the best value facilities can be found in Further Education Colleges. Often they have brand new buildings with state-of-the-art facilities built in. They're also friendly and accommodating.

The truth is you can usually do everything you need to from a home office, spare room or kitchen table. Clients are interested in the quality of service you

provide, not where you run your business from. These days, with a laptop and internet connection you can even run a business on the move (although I personally recommend using travel time to think about business strategy).

What you don't need 7: Employees

Employing people is complicated and costly. I'd recommend avoiding it if you can, especially when you're starting out in business.

You can outsource pretty much everything you don't want to do yourself and build a substantial business in the process. What's more, outsourcing can be very efficient as you only buy services as and when you need them. I don't want to give the impression that it's not good to create jobs. It is and goodness knows we need them. However, the best chance of growing a business that does create real, sustainable jobs is to give the business the best chance of succeeding. When you're growing your business, only employ people for sound business reasons.

Also, remember that just because you don't have employees, it doesn't mean you're not creating wealth or employment – you are, *indirectly*. The more successful your business becomes the more likely it is you'll be providing business opportunities and work for others. They will benefit and so will the wider economy.

What you don't need 8: The latest communications technology.

I need to be careful what I say here. Of course, you do need to take advantage of communications technology. But I know from painful experience how much money you can waste, and how quickly, especially from subscription / contract services. It's oh-so-easy to forget how quickly the costs mount up. Often you can do the same thing for a fraction of the price as pay-as-you-go.

Also, you have to ask yourself whether you really need that latest i-phone or i-pad. OK you might *want* them but do you *need* them? All you need in my opinion is a pay-as-you-go mobile and decent laptop/PC. If you want to save money, this is one of the key areas; only buy the technology and gadgets you really need.

What you don't need 9: The latest software.

The old versions work perfectly well and besides you can usually find free software that'll do the job just as well. There are also very cost-effective alternatives.

One that I have used is called **Open Office** a free suite of 'open source' programs that does everything that Microsoft Office does. In fact, Open Office does business-friendly stuff that Microsoft Office can't do, like convert files to PDF whilst preserving embedded links. That's hugely valuable for the

development of ebooks, which are great marketing tools. And Open Office is free, while Microsoft Office costs a small fortune to buy new.

Another option is to use web-based applications like **Google docs** (Google have a range of web-based applications that work just like Word, Excel and Access). This works like any word processing program, but you don't need to download any software to use it. All you need is a Google account and an internet connection. Also, it has the advantage that you can work collaboratively on documents with colleagues who are based elsewhere. I'm sure this is the way we'll all be doing it in the future, using applications that are hosted remotely.

What you don't need 10: A new car

New cars are unbelievably expensive to buy, insure, maintain and fuel, never mind the eye-watering cost of depreciation. Keep your old one going, or if you're a two-car household, get by with one. It'll save you a fortune and you won't worry about it as much. Starting a business, you don't need the financial strain that is a new car. If image and creating the right impression are important, you can always use an upmarket taxi or hire car if you need to. You can hire a heck of a lot of cars for the cost of owning a new car for a year.

Conclusion

Growing a profitable and sustainable business is very hard work – you quickly forget the luxuries of weekends off and public holidays. My sister-in-law, who's also in business with her spouse once 'joked': "Don't worry, Alan, the first 10 years are the worst!" (well she was smiling at the time).

After 17 years in business I know now she was telling the truth. But I wouldn't change a thing. Running a business is much more than simply about making money (though it's very nice when that happens!). Business is a creative act and a choice. Business is like a highly addictive drug; once you get some success, you're hooked. I could never go back to working for someone else. I accept now that I'm unemployable.

To give your business the best chance of success, you need to look at those things you don't need so that you can **keep your costs to an absolute minimum**. Don't worry about what other people think or about your street-credibility, get on with running and growing your business. To begin with, you just won't earn what you did as an employee, and there's no point in pretending otherwise. But ultimately you have the potential to be in control of your life, earn far more and create real wealth for you and your family. That's a goal genuinely worth pursuing.

Good luck with your business.

Alan Bradshaw

Useful links:

Business articles: <http://www.the-stress-site.net/business-articles.html>

Business mentoring: <http://www.the-stress-site.net/business-mentoring.html>

Alan's blog: <http://alanbradshaw.blogspot.co.uk>

Recommended tools: <http://www.the-stress-site.net/business-tools.html>

Business development toolkit for Professionals (e-book): <http://www.the-stress-site.net/business-development-toolkit.html>

Profile:

Alan Bradshaw is a Business Psychologist specialising in the fields of stress management and resilience. His business, Work-Life Solutions, provides stress management training and consultancy to clients across all sectors. Alan also provides training, coaching and mentoring to consultants and practitioners around business development and marketing.