

A Company Of One: Survival Skills For Solopreneurs

Shien-ru Tsao knows that starting a business on your own can be a bumpy ride, and because she had done it several times, she thought she was ready for anything. But when her latest endeavor —The Kuza Strap, a chic little gizmo she invented to keep her pants tucked inside her boots— took off, the 41-year-old was blindsided by how quickly her worries went from “Will anyone want this thing?” to “How will I fill all these orders?”

“For me, the challenge is that while I’m really good at the creative part, being a solopreneur means you need to wrap your brain around all aspects of the business—manufacturing, advertising, marketing and inventory,” says Tsao, who’s a graphic designer by training. “It’s easy to retreat into the parts of the job that are the most comfortable and fulfilling. But my main hat, every day, has to be sales. No matter how well I do everything else, if I don’t sell, I don’t make any money. It’s that simple.”

Work Reimagined asked Tsao and other solopreneurs for their go-it-alone success strategies:

Recruit a freelance support staff When he bought Revo Guitar Straps, Dale Burgham, 42, thought he could handle every aspect of the tiny specialty company. He had spent years in operations at such big firms as Clorox and Abbott Labs, and believed that managing a one-man show would leave him enough time to build the business and spend more time with his two children, ages 4 and 6. The Oakland, California, dad quickly realized that while he didn’t want to hire another employee, he needed help.

“Feeling spread too thin is a challenge I deal with daily,” says Burgham. “I have developed a team of freelance professionals I call on to help with things like logo/brochure design, website development, market research and online marketing,” he says. That helps him focus on the ins and outs of manufacturing, and still have time to pick the kids up after school.

Fight the urge to isolate When Diane Guididas, of Robbinsville, New Jersey, first started Window Treatments by Diane 12 years ago, “I used to sew everything myself in my basement.” And while that worked fine, “about three years ago, I started hiring other people to do the sewing, so I could be out more with clients and handle the installations.” These days, the 58-year-old says the balance between hands-on creativity and face-to-face contact is an important part of staying engaged. “I’ve discovered that one to two meetings outside the house each day works best for me.”

Some solopreneurs take it even further. While Tsao initially loved the idea of rolling out of bed and being at work, she decided to move her business from home to a New York City building that is home to many other tiny companies. “It’s one of the best things I ever did,” she says. “I get up, I get dressed, I have a purpose. And there are other creative people I can talk to and interact with.”

Flex your tech options Thanks to the cloud, software options get cheaper all the time, and many are perfect for small businesses. (Check out Outright for [online bookkeeping](#), for example, Speak for [easy conference calls](#), or The Neat Company for [tracking and filing documents](#).) And you can Google your way to all kinds of time and money savers. Burgham, for example, swears by online postage software. And for international calls to his manufacturing partners (his guitar straps use exotic woods), there’s Skype.

Make sure you love it Karen Matthews, 58, decided to start Carolina Souvenirs while still working as a technical writer at a pharmaceutical firm, using current earnings to finance the cost of raw materials (like aprons and tee-shirts) and design (she relies on a gifted freelance graphics expert.) Right now, she is selling in some consignment stores, a little wholesale, and from her website, “but there’s a limit to how much I can do, working just on Fridays and weekends. For now, I am laying the foundation and not making money. Hopefully, the business will be prospering by the time I retire in a few years.”

Matthews, who lives in Sanford, North Carolina, got inspired to start her company when she tried to make a gift basket of North Carolina products for a friend in Africa, and couldn’t find anything she liked. “They were all these tacky souvenirs from the 1950s,” she says. Using her crafting and photography skills to fill a gap in the marketplace has been unexpectedly satisfying, even if her husband occasionally gripes about the baskets, boxes and fabrics that occasionally fill up their home.

Matthews sees herself expanding into additional categories. “I’ve even written a children’s book about a place called Lizard Lick, and hope to develop some products to go with it. I’m just letting my creative side go, and it’s very fulfilling.”