

Businesspeople Earn Every Penny

Back in February, I got the idea to create a COVID vaccination t-shirt (now on sale!). Reflecting on my past experience, I figured it would be easy.

Step 1: Run an illustration contest on Freelancer.com, something I've successfully done several times before.

Step 2: Take the winning entries to Zazzle.com, design some shirts, and sell them using the same interface, another thing I've done several times before (albeit on a small scale).

My thinking: The whole process would be pretty fun, so I'd only need to sell a few dozen shirts to cover the cost of the contest and count the project a success. I'm still optimistic, but the process has definitely been much more aggravating than expected. A chronological list of snags:

1. One of my winning entrants warned me that the other two winners had copied their designs. Unpleasant news.
2. When I followed up, one of the accused was able to produce clear documentation that she had purchased the rights to her design. One problem solved.
3. The other accused contestant, however, seemed quite evasive about the situation. Or perhaps it was a language problem? I didn't like the idea of paying for an unusable design, but I also felt bad about refusing to reward one of my winners. After much prodding, he finally produced clear documentation that the images he incorporated into his design were in the public domain. Another problem solved, but the conflict weighed on me.
4. I was planning on immediately announcing that the three shirts were available for sale, but I decided I ought to order test copies for myself first. And figuring I was losing sales every day, I paid for rush delivery from Zazzle.
5. A couple days later, Zazzle sent me an email canceling the order. Why? They claimed that the sole fully original design violated copyright! Hopefully I'll work this out eventually, but apparently every drawing of a guy in a white suit at a disco infringes *Saturday Night Fever*. Argh.
6. I could have challenged the ruling, but instead I looked around for an alternative vendor. I figured they'd all be pretty similar, so I quickly settled on Printful.
7. Since I'd never done business with Printful, I had to place another test order.
8. After a couple days, Printful emailed with with a new problem: Printing a white semi-

transparent design on a black sweatshirt yields an unwanted gray color. So I went back and revised the order.

9. Soon afterwards, Zazzle let me know my cancelled order was in the mail, rush order surcharge included! In the past, Zazzle cancelled *all* items in an order if it flagged *any* item for copyright problems. Now, apparently, it sends everything that wasn't cancelled. Argh.

10. A week later, I checked on my Printful order, and discovered that I had somehow failed to click the final "OK" after revising the gray sweatshirt snafu, so my test order was still in limbo. Sigh. So I fixed it again, double stampies no erasies.

11. A few days later, I finally got my Printful order. The products looked good. I was ready to go. But when I went to the website to offer the products for sale to customers, I discovered that Printful – unlike Zazzle – makes selling designs a pain in the neck. To do business on Printful, I'd first have to sign up for a totally separate vendor website, and then merge the two accounts. Argh.

12. After trying this for a half hour, I realized that I would be better off going back to Zazzle. So I dumped Printful and created a new Zazzle store, **#FearMeNot**, minus the disapproved design. Happily, the Zazzle interface seemed to work just as seamlessly as I remembered. You can order "Fear me not! I got my COVID vaccine" shirts, sweatshirts, and hoodies now. (Be sure to use the coupon code TUESDAYGIFTZ).

So at the end of this arduous and aggravating journey, I finally started selling my products to nudge the world to back to normalcy. In a week or so, I'll try to convince the Zazzle copyright people that my third design is legit. (Even if Saturday Night Fever does have a copyright on all images of disco-dancers in white suits, my design should clearly be protected as parody). Overall, I think this will be a positive experience for me. The creative pleasure I've enjoyed plus the money I expect to make will probably exceed the subjective and financial cost of the dozen hassles I've already swallowed.

Still, a few more hassles could easily change my mind. And selling t-shirts on Zazzle is virtually the lowest-hassle business I can imagine running. Which makes me picture the horrors of creating and managing an *actual* business.

Indeed, I suspect that anyone who's ever run an actual business has been rolling their eyes at my self-pity. Twelve little snags? Real entrepreneurs face more challenges every day. Unlike me, they have to coordinate a long list of products, each with their own attendant baggage. Unlike me, they have to manage a physical space. Unlike me, they have to hire and direct employees. And unlike me, they have to cope with a morass of government regulation. I don't care if actual businesspeople do roll their eyes at me; their can-do attitude in the face of endless obstacles still fills me with awe.

Note further that in this very blog post I've already publicly complained more about my business woes than most businesspeople ever will. Are they stoic? Do they realize that hardly anyone will sympathize with their plight? Or are they just too busy making the trains run on time to stop and reflect? All three answers make businesspeople look admirable indeed. They don't just make the world work. They bear the suffering of the world in silence. No wonder I love them!

What motivates businesspeople? While the full answer is complex, the basic answer is clear: Money. People run businesses to get richer – and ideally, to get rich. And whenever I get a small taste of the challenges businesspeople overcome, not to mention the disrespect they endure in our society, I have to say that businesspeople earn every penny. As someone who definitely does *not* want your job, entrepreneurs of the world, I thank you.

P.S. Put your customers at ease with a #FearMeNot shirt!