

How To Be A Successful Edupreneur

During the 1960s and early 1970s, there was a flurry of innovative schools. The “free school” movement was underway, swept along by a strong anti-establishment current during Vietnam War-era America. The modern homeschooling movement was also born, birthed first by countercultural “hippie” liberals before growing rapidly within the religious conservative sphere.

When the social protests faded and the countercultural stream dried up, the majority of the “free schools” also disappeared. Homeschooling, with its agility, hyper-personalization, and rootedness in the family unit, expanded and flourished, ultimately becoming a bipartisan movement that today educates over two million kids.

But most of the “free schools” and similarly small, ideologically-driven schools of the countercultural era vanished. Ron Miller writes in *Free Schools, Free People* that “when, in the 1970s, American politics stabilized and hippie fashions, rock music, natural foods, and other trappings of the counterculture were transformed into commercial commodities, the tension between consciousness and politics, between personal wholeness and social change, developed into a split, and radical pedagogy was largely divided into its constituent elements.”

A few lucky schools remained, like the Sudbury Valley School, which this year celebrates its 50th anniversary and serves as a beacon for edupreneurs looking to launch self-directed, Sudbury-style schools. Most of the earlier edupreneurs were not so fortunate and a primary reason may be that they launched schools based on a mission mindset as opposed to an entrepreneurial one.

This continues to be a problem today. Small, innovative schools and self-directed learning centers frequently fail or constantly teeter on the verge of collapse, often because they are driven by ideology and not by business savvy.

Some of these edupreneurs openly declare that they don’t want to embrace sound business practices, wrongly associating successful entrepreneurship with greed. They may run their school as a non-profit, arguing that they are not about maximizing revenue but are offering unmeasurable value through relationships and positive experiences.

Newsflash: Whether you run XYZ learning center or Nike, you are creating a value proposition for your clients that hinges on relationship-building and positive experiences. Relationships and positivity are not unique to non-profit edupreneurs. Clients are paying you for a product. This is a free-market exchange.

Successful edupreneurs—whether for-profit or non-profit ones—recognize that a clear and

persuasive mission is an essential starting point, but if you stop there, you'll fail. Ideology can only get you so far. Generating revenue, whether through tuition, or donors, or venture capital funds, is the key to an enduring enterprise. So here are four tips for launching-and sustaining-a successful school or learning center:

1. Go beyond mission to value.

By all means, start with a clear and powerful mission statement, but quickly move to your value proposition. Why should clients pay for your service? Why is that service special? What do you offer that your competitors don't? When I launched my corporate training company pre-parenthood, I saw a specific need that was not being met by my competitors and I focused exclusively on a niche market. I created value for clients and built a highly profitable company with paid employees. You can do this, too.

2. Revenue should be the goal.

Some non-profit edupreneurs cringe at words like "revenue" and "profit," but unless you have a rich uncle bankrolling your venture, you need cash. Time and again I hear from edupreneurs who tried to launch learning centers or schools and they failed because they could no longer work for free. Building a business may require sacrificing some initial income and security, but it should be temporary. Revenue should be your goal.

3. Think like an entrepreneur.

What is the opportunity? Where are your competitors failing? Where are the gaps? Successful entrepreneurs seize that gap. They create a product or service that is new and needed. They talk to their customers and their potential customers and then they work their tails off to offer a commodity that is not currently offered-or not offered well. And yes, you are selling a commodity. Even if you are a non-profit, social entrepreneur, you are in the commodity business. Unless you are bartering, clients are paying you for a service. They are giving you money in exchange for something of value. Your job is to sell them on that value.

4. Sharpen your business skills.

A major reason why the mission-driven schools of the '60s and '70s failed, and why new ones continue to fail today, is that the founders focused on principle and neglected the practical. Don't do this. Accomplished edupreneurs know how good businesses-even non-profit ones-work. They understand revenue and expenses. They know the difference between fixed and variable costs. They recognize how sales and marketing work, and why they are so important. Do you know what a balance sheet is? If not, start there before launching your enterprise.

You can avoid the fate of the earlier edupreneurs whose ventures dried up when their ideology could not sustain them long enough to pay the bills. Launching a school or a center is running a business. You are an entrepreneur. Your customers are the key to your

success. You are selling a commodity.

The sooner you adopt the mindset of an entrepreneur, and embrace sound business practices, the better able you will be to create and grow the school or center of your dreams.

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