

I won't do it your way

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Meet the non-conformists kicking goals despite their obstinate refusal to abide by the rules of the game.

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Those contemplating starting a business rarely lack advice. Friends, family members, mentors and, not least, other business owners are only too happy to reinforce the conventional wisdom: write a detailed business plan, set targets, safeguard your intellectual property, establish an online presence, network relentlessly, promote yourself shamelessly, delegate madly.

Yet the orthodox approach is not necessarily always the appropriate one. More often than might be imagined, wilful types insist on doing business how they damn well please. As long as they are good at what they do, they frequently end up both happy and successful, as the case studies below demonstrate.

The non-goalsetter

"I started my PR business with not only no business plan but no plan at all," confesses the eponymous owner of Dani Lombard Public Relations. "All I knew I wanted to keep doing what I was good at - PR - but stop working for the man. I figured I'd focus on trying to get just one client and if I couldn't I'd go and get a job. It was a zero pressure proposition and I had zero expectations on how things were going to go down. All I focused on was working hard and doing my best. Almost eight years later I've got a lovely PR consultancy with great staff and clients."

The non-promoter

"We just sit around and wait for the phone to ring. We don't do any outbound sales despite being strongly advised against such an approach," says Ben Neumann, owner of Liquid Infusion, a mobile bar business.

So how does he stay in business? "When we started out I painted a couple of trucks and vans black, splashed our logo over them and parked them all over town to give the impression we had lots of work. Nowadays, I tell staff that we've got a captive audience of 100-plus people at any event we put on and train them to engage with guests and obtain leads. After every event we ask the client to provide feedback on our Facebook page and Twitter account. I've built Liquid Infusions up to be the largest business of its kind in Australia by creating fans who generate word-of-mouth advertising."

The non-delegator

"When I was starting my first business venture I was advised to get partners who could share the costs and workload," says Ronan Bray, founder and managing director of www.jobsandservices.com.au, a website that matches service and trade providers with local jobs.

"I chose not to follow that advice and I've managed everything myself - website design and maintenance, market research, advertising and PR. I've even taken care of as much of the legal work as possible, in consultation with a legal firm. I'm doing all that on top of a nine-to-five day job and it's a massive amount of work but I driven to make sure my site, which has had 30,000 views and 300 businesses posting their services in the last four months, continues to grow."

The all-round maverick

Electrical engineer, erstwhile CSIRO employee and renewable energy enthusiast Finn Peacock built SolarQuotes.com.au into a multimillion-dollar online business while seemingly breaking every rule in the 'How to run a proper business' book. First off, there was no preparation before launching his business.

"There was no market research or business plan, I just chose a market I found interesting - solar - and created a website and wrote down what I



Ben Neumann marches to the beat of his own drum.



Ronan Bray: manages everything himself.

thought people should know about installing solar energy systems. Then I started getting and selling leads.”

Peacock doesn't have an office and has no interest in a potential staff member's experience or qualifications. “I've now got four full-time and four part-time staff members spread across five countries, all of whom work from home, as I do. I've never asked to see a CV - I just give people small projects and see how they perform before deciding whether to hire them.”

Staff do get to profit share but they don't get equity because “equity means dealing with lawyers and they just make life complicated and stressful”.

By this point you probably won't be surprised to hear Peacock won't ever be taking his business public, no matter what kind of payday might be on offer. “Most people who start their own business do it because they crave autonomy,” he observes. “But as soon as you have an investor you have a boss.”

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