



SEVEN LESSONS IN *agricultural entrepreneurship*

by Alina Martin, Co-Founder, The Harvest Hub

START-UPS AND BUILDING businesses

in general are for the over ambitious, slightly insane and for people who don't really like to sleep. It's passion, vision and execution all rolled into one day. It's exhausting, regularly terrifying and often filled with stress, tears and feelings of inadequacy – and I wouldn't have it any other way. If that's not enough to scare someone to quickly run to stable employment with a nice, large stable company; I'm not sure what is.

Here's the other side of building and starting a business no one tells you. If you have a small amount of success, which is not guaranteed, in fact you are almost guaranteed to fail, it can be the most rewarding, smile inducing adventure of your life. It also can be addicting, all-consuming and drain your bank account, your mind and many times your relationships. The truly talented at building businesses, do so at great costs and those costs should not be ignored. It's not for everyone so if you are thinking about starting a business, I caution you deeply.

Here is my story, my adventure and lessons I learned along the way.

LESSON ONE & TWO

My career started like any other. I went to college, got a job with a great little start up concierge business in Calgary. We planned events, went shopping for the wealthy, made reservations and restaurant recommendations. Basically, the internet before the internet. It was a recipe that quickly lead us to succeed initially and naïvely (the internet was coming!) lead us directly into bankruptcy in 2004. To this day, it has been my greatest lesson about cash flow, otherwise business is basically a strategy in figuring how to find more money to fund operations. Its crushing and kills more start-ups and businesses than you know.

Lesson number one: Make sure you have enough cash flow to sustain the ups and downs throughout a year. You will have strong months and weak months, but you still have to pay bills.

Second lesson: Figure out your margins early. We were under-charging for our hourly services and in the end, we just didn't make enough profit.

LESSON THREE

In March of 2004, after the bankruptcy, my father graciously gave me a job in his little safety company. It was a welcomed change but difficult transition. I used to joke when people asked, "What is it like working with your dad?" I'd reply, "Imagine this, not only can your boss call you into his office and yell at you there, but he can call you at home, and yell at you there too!!" But somehow among the arguing and disagreements; I could generate a few good ideas, had solid business acumen and was a wizard at closing sales. I fell in love with the safety business, hard. I was so proud of the tremendous work we did, it spoke to my soul, my heart and my family. So much so, that in 2008, my father sat me down in my office and said, and I quote "Alina, you are ready. Your mother and I want to retire to Mexico. Don't screw up my retirement!" As quickly as it was said, that decision allowed me to buy my family business from my father. It wasn't until he departed that we truly experienced double-digit growth. It wasn't that he was holding the company back in any way, it was that the vision

we had created together on marrying technology to safety had finally taken off. Timing and opportunity had met perfectly.

Lesson number three: Timing is everything. Make sure you are paying attention to what is going on in the world.

LESSON FOUR

By 2012, we were doing business with most of Canada's top tier companies and we were winning awards at an astronomical rate. The momentum was palpable and everyone in the office was working together as a collective. Around the same time I got devastating news that my father was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer; single handily the hardest moment of my life to date, and I don't wish that depth of grief on anyone. He passed away on a cold Saturday morning in November after a short battle. He was desperately loved by all of us, he was the monarch of our family and he is forever missed. He was and will always be my biggest fan and I'm eternally grateful for his love, support and business guidance.

Lesson number four: Surround yourself with those that believe in you – no matter what. Learn the difference between “fitting-in and belonging.” They are opposite.

LESSON FIVE

In December of 2015, I sold my safety business to my supplier and took stock in the new company. Truthfully, I had lost my passion for the safety business and although the business was successful by all standards, and amazing as it was to be a key figure in all that success, I was continually uncomfortable and felt myself gravitate towards building something else new. Being in the

trenches again so to speak.

Lesson number five: When your gut is screaming at you something isn't right – you should listen, or misery ensues.

LESSON SIX

In late 2017, my husband approached me with an idea to change the indoor agricultural industry. He had paid attention to this world and identified a gap in hydroponic and aeroponic vertical farming equipment. The gap was soil-based, indoor agricultural equipment – it didn't exist. What does that mean? Basically, no one was manufacturing soil-based indoor equipment; they were all producing hydroponic and aeroponic growing equipment. This equipment while excellent, lacks the ability to grow deep root vegetables. Think traditional farm meets technology. By 2050, there will be 9 billion people on the planet. Right now, at current agricultural production rates – we won't be able to feed them all. Indoor soil-based farms and indoor hydroponic and aeroponic farms could be the answer.

Lesson number six: Just because your business concept is a good idea, doesn't mean the market wants it, needs it or is willing to pay for it. Do your research, meet with potential customers and competitors, build out projected financials, run best and worst case, get your idea out there, validate it – then spend your money building it out.

LESSON SEVEN

Business ultimately is about solving problems. Businesses that succeed, solve problems well. The world romanticizes

entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs, Mary Kay, Bill Gates, Vera Wang, JK Rowling, Warren Buffet, the list goes on and on. The reality is 90% of start-ups fail. I'm not saying to not start a business; I'm saying that you need to understand the risks and what it takes to succeed. Be real about it and be real with yourself. Do you have what it takes to do it?

Lesson number seven: Know yourself. Inexperienced management is a killer in business.

Through all that – I love building businesses. I can't imagine my life any other way. I think Elon Musk says it best, “The reality is great highs, terrible lows and unrelenting stress. Don't think people want to hear about the last two.”

And finally, I believe that if you figure out what you are a good at, then become exceptional at it, you will fall in love with what you do. That's when your work becomes rewarding. **AG**



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