

Building a company of giants

How putting your ego aside can help your business prosper

By Dan Antonelli, President and Creative Director, Graphic D-Signs, Inc. and SignShopMarketing.com



Our new site at <http://www.graphicd-signs.com> uses some advanced functionality, including TypeKit, which allows us to specify font usage on the site. It's also heavily optimized for search engines, which has resulted in a significant amount of inquiries per week. We opted out of using Flash, and instead use JQUERY to render the top navigation, which keeps the site functional on all mobile devices and iPads. We also streamlined our previous navigation. Google Analytics was installed so we can monitor user behavior, and also make changes as needed.

"If each of us hires people who are smaller than we are, we shall become a company of dwarfs. But if each of us hires people who are bigger than we are, we shall become a company of giants."
—David Ogilvy

"Hire people who are better than you are, then leave them to get on with it. Look for people who will aim for the remarkable, who will not settle for the routine."—David Ogilvy

Having worked with over 500 small businesses in the past 15 years on their marketing and advertising needs, I've learned a few common characteristics that extremely successful business owners share. And conversely, it has also become very clear what the characteristics of the mediocre businesses are.

My own path Having grown up lettering and pinstripping, I certainly had a passion for letters and sign design. And after graduation from college with a degree in Communications and Advertising, I knew my life would revolve around type and design.

But I had this notion that as long as I was doing what I loved, the money wasn't that important. Soon after launching my company, a few events transpired which changed my focus on my business. They caused me to rethink my priorities and the direction in which I wanted to go.

First, at a few Letterhead-type meets, I had the opportunity to meet some super-talented designers. While the awe of meeting some of these folks was inspiring, what stuck out to me was the financial difficulties that most were experiencing. That really hit home and, frankly, scared me. I thought to myself, "Man, I couldn't hold a candle to these guys. How am I going to ever make it?"

The impending birth of my twin daughters was the other event that caused a more immediate need for me to rethink my focus. With my wife not able to work, and with

mortgage, health insurance and car payments to make, I knew I needed to become a businessman first and an artist second.

I also didn't like where I saw the sign business heading. Signs seemed to be becoming much more of a commodity. I knew I wanted to avoid becoming a shop selling "vinyl graphics by the pound."

So I slowly began to formulate my plan of becoming less of a sign company and more of a small-business advertising agency.

Those events transpired over 10 years ago. Today, my firm is doing exactly what I set out to do. We stand as an eight-person, advertising agency focused on the marketing needs of small businesses. We still do a lot of vehicle advertising, but we no longer actually install or fabricate anything.

While there are many factors which led to our growth, there were two primary reasons. First, I had to put my ego aside for the sake of the company. Secondly, I had to aggressively market the business to attract the type of businesses I wanted to work with.

The first step is admitting you have a problem

What does ego have to do with success?

For me, it has meant never being afraid to hire people who are better than myself. Like Ogilvy says, I've built my own version of a company of giants by surrounding myself with some very creative people who complement my own skill sets.

Jeffrey Devey, my senior illustrator, is a perfect example. Jeff is simply a brilliant illustrator and logo designer. And illustration is definitely not my gig. (I can't draw.) But typography is definitely a strength I have. Together, Jeff and I make a great team when it comes to building brands. So instead of using my lack of illustrative ability as a crutch to explain mediocre work, Jeff has allowed us to produce great work together.

Each hire has been a methodical and conscience choice to bring another expert on staff. Whether it's a writer, web designer,



Our new photo galleries are easy to navigate and direct clients to. The site is also managed with a custom Content Management System (CMS) which allows us to easily add, delete and arrange photos. We spent a lot of time Photoshopping each vehicle on this gallery, with most photos having the backgrounds removed. As with most of our photos, this one is actually a Photoshop composite, shown to a client for comping purposes.



We invested a good amount of time on our Case Studies section, with over 20 different companies in different sectors featured. This is a great format to show all the various elements of the work that was undertaken for each client. It's also great for potential clients, who might be in a similar business, to view how we might bring all the elements together for their business.

programmer, marketing strategist or SEO expert—each team member succeeds in making the company better.

Had I chosen to be afraid of hiring people who were smarter than myself, there's no way I'd have built what I've built today. Instead, I would have only had myself and my ego to blame for my lack of success.

Marketing yourself to build the right business

Over the years, I've definitely invested a significant amount of resources into the marketing of our business. It's one area we've been very aggressive with, whether in a good economy or, more recently, a bad one.

I've made it a priority for the company to invest in both online and print initiatives, both of which have brought back huge returns on investments. And it's a constant, ongoing, aggressive strategy. Because no matter how successful our efforts are, they can always be improved upon.

Our recently-redesigned website is a perfect example. Our last site, which was previously redesigned four years ago was generating 20 to 25 leads per week. So why would you change it? Well, for one, it didn't represent our best work and abilities. And secondly, it didn't represent the image I wanted to portray, or a medium that I felt would carry us for the next four years. It didn't communicate who we were and, more importantly, where I wanted us to go. I wanted to be prepared for when this economy really gets going again.

So I made a tremendous investment in time and money to redo it—to the tune of over 300 man hours. If you want to do the math on that for our hourly creative rate of \$125/hr., that amounts to almost \$40,000 in billable time that I put back into the company. And the results have been what I expected: better qualified leads, and attracting the type of clients I want to work more with.

The successful business owners' mentality

I've witnessed firsthand the common characteristics of many small business owners as I've had the pleasure of working with them on building their businesses. And for those business owners, much of it really does go back to ego. They're not afraid to work with other professionals who not only are experts in their chosen fields, but also allow the business owner to focus on what they do best, which is running their business.

Successful business owners are also not content with things as they are. Because they realize that staying on top means constantly reinvesting in their business and anticipating what lies on the horizon. That means survey-

ing the lay of the land and taking concrete steps to work towards specific goals. They're forward thinking—constantly staying up on the trends in their profession, and educating themselves about their clients and market conditions.

They work on their business, not in their business. And they are great at planning and executing strategies for the future—rather than being reactionary. They know where they want to go, and they're focused on putting together the team to help them get there.

And successful business owners are always keeping company with others who are successful and share that *can-do* mentality. They purposely avoid those who instead insist “you can't...”

The mediocre business-owners' mentality

While it's very easy to blame the economy for many businesses failing (and surely that may be the primary reason for many), smart business owners took steps to prepare themselves for a rainy day. It's easy for people to make a living in a good economy, but when that fails, you see which businesses continue to survive—and even thrive—because of their planning.

What happened to these businesses that are hurting today? For many, they let their own “success” blind them to the realities on the horizon. I call this the “complacency syndrome.” This concept runs through an owner's psyche—and affects nearly every decision they make.

The classic example you are all familiar with, starting with the most basic of businesses, is their logos. How many businesses have poor logos and brands, and how many have you tried to sell on a better logo? The smart owner grasps the importance, and is ready to take their business to the next level and invest in better marketing tools. But the mediocre business owner is blind to how their branding is hurting them—because their own “success” in their mind validates their poor brand.

One of my favorite quotes around the office is “success in spite of a poor identity is not a valid reason to perpetuate it.”

The mediocre business owner generally refuses to pay anyone for services they think they can do themselves. They instead waste valuable time doing things that they don't do well, and at the same time, they fail to understand how that mentality is poor use of their time. It also usually reflects poorly on their business—especially when it involves marketing. It's ironic that sign artists fall into this trap often, and attempt to tackle tasks which they are not usually qualified to undertake.

Take web design. It's the storefront of your

business and should be the primary way you advertise your sign business (via effective search engine marketing). So instead of working on income-generating tasks, many attempt to build their own site. But just because you are good in art or graphic design does not make you a web designer. But their ego, again, has gotten in the way of a rational business decision. And while I applaud their interest in learning new skills, it sometimes comes at the expense of their own business.

Think of the irony of paying \$40,000 for a vinyl printer to do wraps, then failing to properly invest in marketing that line of business. That mediocre business owner instead sees spending \$5000 or so on a site that represents his business well—and also generates leads—as something he doesn't need.

The same can be said of the contractor who spends \$40k on a truck, and another \$20k on equipment, but yet has no money to actually market his construction business. Where's the logic in such thinking?

And when it comes to employees, the mediocre business owner usually can't see hiring anyone who is better at tasks than they are. Because doing so would only serve to remind themselves of their own shortcomings—and no one likes a daily reminder of their own shortcomings.

So it's much easier to continue to surround themselves with mediocrity. After all, it's much better to feel superior around people whose skills aren't up to par with their own. And this only reinforces their ego. They know everything, and everyone else knows nothing. After all, they're the boss, right?

Are you ready to move to the next level?

Are you prepared to help your business grow? You'll need to ask yourself the hard questions and answer honestly about yourself and your own skills. Create a checklist of critical business tasks, and rate your abilities. Maybe you won't like what you hear. The real question is this: What do you do with your new-found wisdom, and can your ego handle the obvious solutions? Consider checking yours at the door and maybe you'll start down the path of building a company of giants. •§



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