

ANYTHING YOU WANT BY DEREK SIVERS | BOOK SUMMARY

In Anything You Want, author Derek Sivers highlights the main lessons learned while building his business, CD Baby. This quick read is full of actionable and sometimes controversial lessons that go against the norm. Derek challenges conventional business thinking and turns a lot of assumptions on their heads.

Ten years of experience in one hour

This is most of what I learned in ten years, compacted into something you can read in an hour. I hope you find these ideas useful for your own life or business. I also hope you disagree with some of them. Then I hope you e-mail me to tell me about your different point of view, because that's my favorite part of all. (I'm a student, not a guru.)

What's your compass?

Don't be on your deathbed someday, having squandered your one chance at life, full of regret because you pursued little distractions instead of big dreams. You need to know your personal philosophy of what makes you happy and what's worth doing.

Make a dream come true

When you make a business, you get to make a little universe where you control all the laws. This is your utopia. When you make it a dream come true for yourself, it'll be a dream come true for someone else, too.

A business model with only two numbers

A business plan should never take more than a few hours of work—hopefully no more than a few minutes. The best plans start simple. A quick glance and common sense should tell you if the numbers will work. The rest are details.

This ain't no revolution

If you think revolution needs to feel like war, you'll overlook the importance of simply serving people better. When you're onto something great, it won't feel like revolution. It'll feel like uncommon sense.

If it's not a hit, switch

We've all heard about the importance of persistence. But I had misunderstood. Success comes from persistently improving and inventing, not from persistently doing what's not working.

Present each new idea or improvement to the world. If multiple people are saying, "Wow! Yes! I need this! I'd be happy to pay you to do this!" then you should probably do it. But if the response is anything less, don't pursue it.

No "yes." Either "Hell yeah!" or "no."

For every event you get invited to, every request to start a new project, if you're not saying, "Hell yeah!" about it, say no. We're all busy. We've all taken on too much. Saying yes to less is the way out.

Just like that, my plan completely changed

Anytime you think you know what your new business will be doing, remember this quote from serial entrepreneur Steve Blank: "No business plan survives first contact with customers."

The advantage of no funding

By not having any money to waste, you never waste money. Since I couldn't afford a programmer, I went to the bookstore and got a \$25 book on PHP and MySQL programming. Then I sat down and learned it, with no programming experience. Necessity is a great teacher.

Never forget that absolutely everything you do is for your customers. Make every decision—even decisions about whether to expand the business, raise money, or promote someone—according to what's best for your customers.

Start now. No funding needed.

If you want to be useful, you can always start now, with only 1 percent of what you have in your grand vision. It'll be a humble prototype version of your grand vision, but you'll be in the game. You'll be ahead of the rest, because you actually started, while others are waiting for the finish line to magically appear at the starting line.

Ideas are just a multiplier of execution

To me, ideas are worth nothing unless they are executed. They are just a multiplier. Execution is worth millions.

To make a business, you need to multiply the two components. The most brilliant idea, with no execution, is worth \$20. The most brilliant idea takes great execution to be worth \$200,000,000.

Formalities play on fear. Bravely refuse.

As your business grows, don't let the leeches sucker you into all that stuff they pretend you need. They'll play on your fears, saying that you need this stuff to protect yourself against lawsuits. They'll scare you with horrible worst-case scenarios. But those are just sales tactics. You don't need any of it.

The strength of many little customers

When you build your business on serving thousands of customers, not dozens, you don't have to worry about any one customer leaving or making special demands. If most of your customers love what you do, but one doesn't, you can just say good-bye and wish him the best, with no hard feelings.

Proudly exclude people

Have the confidence to know that when your target 1 percent hears you excluding the other 99 percent, the people in that 1 percent will come to you because you've shown how much you value them.

Why no advertising?

This goes back to the utopian perfect-world ideal of why we're doing what we're doing in the first place. In a perfect world, would your website be covered with advertising? When you've asked your customers what would improve your service, has anyone said, "Please fill your website with more advertising"?

This is just one of many options

You can't pretend there's only one way to do it. Your first idea is just one of many options. No business goes as planned, so make ten radically different plans.

You don't need a plan or a vision

Do you have a big visionary master plan for how the world will work in twenty years? Do you have massive ambitions to revolutionize your industry? Don't feel bad if you don't. I never did.

"I miss the mob."

Never forget why you're really doing what you're doing. Are you helping people? Are they happy? Are you happy? Are you profitable? Isn't that enough?

How do you grade yourself?

How do you grade yourself? It's important to know in advance, to make sure you're staying focused on what's honestly important to you, instead of doing what others think you should.

Care about your customers more than about yourself

To me, it was just common sense. Of course you should care about your customers more than you care about yourself! Isn't that Rule No. 1 of providing a good service? It's all about them, not about you.

But even well-meaning companies accidentally get trapped in survival mode. A business is started to solve a problem. But if the problem were truly solved, that business would no longer be needed! So the business accidentally or unconsciously keeps the problem around so that they can keep solving it for a fee.

Act like you don't need the money

If you set up your business like you don't need the money, people are happier to pay you. When someone's doing something for the money, people can sense it, like they sense a desperate lover. It's a turnoff. When someone's doing something for love, being generous instead of stingy, trusting instead of fearful, it triggers this law: We want to give to those who give.

Don't punish everyone for one person's mistake

When one customer wrongs you, remember the hundred thousand who did not. You're lucky to own your own business. Life is good. You can't prevent bad things from happening. Learn to shrug. Resist the urge to punish everyone for one person's mistake.

A real person, a lot like you

It's dehumanizing to have thousands of people passing through our computer screens, so we do things we'd never do if those people were sitting next to us. It's too overwhelming to remember that at the end of every computer is a real person, a lot like you, whose birthday was last week, who has three best friends but nobody to spoon at night, and who is personally affected by what you say.

You should feel pain when you're unclear

Writing that e-mail to customers—carefully eliminating every unnecessary word, and reshaping every sentence to make sure it could not be misunderstood—would take me all day. One unclear sentence? Immediate \$5,000 penalty. Ouch.

I see new websites trying to look impressive, filled with hundreds of puffy, unnecessary sentences. I feel bad that the people behind those sites haven't felt the pain of trying to e-mail that text to thousands of people, to directly see how misunderstood or ignored it is.

The most successful e-mail I ever wrote

When you're thinking of how to make your business bigger, it's tempting to try to think all the big thoughts and come up with world-changing massive-action plans. But please know that it's often the tiny details that really thrill people enough to make them tell all their friends about you.

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Little things make all the difference

Every outgoing e-mail has a "From:" name, right? Why not use that to make people smile, too? With one line of code, I made it so that every outgoing e-mail customized the "From:" field to be "CD Baby loves first name." So if the customer's name was Susan, every e-mail she got from us would say it was from "CD Baby loves Susan." Customers loved this!

Even if you want to be big someday, remember that you never need to act like a big boring company. Over ten years, it seemed like every time someone raved about how much he loved CD Baby, it was because of one of these little fun human touches.

It's OK to be casual

The thought was that it's almost impossible to tell what someone's going to be like on the job until he's actually on the job for a few weeks. So I'd hire lightly and fire lightly. Luckily we didn't need to fire that often. Maybe the fact that the new hires

were friends of friends helped with the trust part.

Naive quitting

There's a benefit to being naive about the norms of the world—deciding from scratch what seems like the right thing to do, instead of just doing what others do.

Prepare to double

Never be the typical tragic small business that gets frazzled and freaked out when business is doing well. It sends a repulsive “I can't handle this!” message to everyone. Instead, if your internal processes are always designed to handle twice your existing load, it sends an attractive “come on in, we've got plenty of room” message.

It's about being, not having

But that's forgetting about the joy of learning and doing. Yes, it may take longer. Yes, it may be inefficient. Yes, it may even cost you millions of dollars in lost opportunities because your business is growing slower because you're insisting on doing something yourself. But the whole point of doing anything is because it makes you happy! That's it!

The day Steve Jobs dissed me in a keynote

But I never again promised a customer that I could do something that was beyond my full control.

Delegate or die: The self-employment trap

There's a big difference between being self-employed and being a business owner. Being self-employed feels like freedom until you realize that if you take time off, your business crumbles. To be a true business owner, make it so that you could leave for a year, and when you came back, your business would be doing better than when you left.

Make it anything you want

Happiness is the real reason you're doing anything, right? Even if you say it's for the money, the money is just a means to happiness, isn't it? But what if it's proven that after a certain point, money doesn't create any happiness at all, but only headaches? You may be much happier as a \$1 million business than a \$1 billion business.

Trust, but verify

I learned a hard lesson in hindsight: Trust, but verify. Remember it when delegating. You have to do both.

Delegate, but don't abdicate

I learned an important word: abdicate. To abdicate means to surrender or relinquish power or responsibility; this word is usually used when a king abdicates the throne or crown. Lesson learned too late: Delegate, but don't abdicate.

How I knew I was done

I've been asked a few times by other entrepreneurs, "How do you know when it's time to sell?" My answer is, "You'll know." But I hope this detailed story describes how it will feel.

Why I gave my company to charity

When I decided to sell CD Baby, I already had enough. I live simply. I don't own a house, a car, or even a TV. The less I own, the happier I am. The lack of stuff gives me the priceless freedom to live anywhere anytime.

You make your perfect world

No matter which goal you choose, there will be lots of people telling you you're wrong. Just pay close attention to what excites you and what drains you. Pay close attention to when you're being the real you and when you're trying to impress an invisible jury. Even if what you're doing is slowing the growth of your business—if it makes you happy, that's OK. It's your choice to remain small.