

The Power of a Plan

I started mowing grass for money in 1971 and as I mowed I did a lot of thinking. Most commercial mowers then were walk-behinds, so I had plenty of time to think while I walked hour after hour, day after day. My mind would drift at times flooded with so many thoughts. I thanked God to be healthy, free and able to do the type of work I enjoyed. I loved, I mean I really loved working outside in the fresh air, and I loved my new career.

I would think about how great the job would look when it was done and think about how my crew could do the job faster so we could earn more money. I also used to think about how hard it was to get my first group of good customers and keep them happy. I worried about what would happen if I broke my leg or got sick. Would years of hard work go down the drain? The people I had working with me could never run my business. I would lose everything. It was my “aha” moment.

While I mowed, I began to formulate a vision in my mind about how I could avoid potential catastrophe and achieve success. This vision

was my first real plan. The only problem was that I didn't write it down. I later learned that a vision not written down is just a dream. When a vision is put in writing only then is it called a plan.

A plan is important because it determines the steps needed to execute your vision. How sad when an owner finally sits down to calculate the company's net worth, only to realize that years of hard work resulted in little to no equity. The balance sheet may show that the only real equity is used vehicles and equipment. That is a sad situation for someone who has worked hard for years, including many 75-hour weeks.

Without a plan, your life is just getting through a series of todays. Success is not just the result of hard work or there would be a lot of rich people. You can't always *work* yourself out of a frustrating situation. You have to *think* your way out. At times you have to be more strategic and less tactical. You need a vision about where you, as a business owner, want to be one day and a detailed supporting plan about how you are going to get there.

The problem with planning is that most owners – including me – have to get to a place where a plan becomes absolutely necessary before we will invest the time and effort needed to write one. Some have to enter encounter problems that only a business plan will help solve before they plan. The power of a written business plan is that it connects all aspects of your business in a logical way that makes it easier to make day-to-day decisions that lead you toward your ultimate goal – a profitable business.

People without formal business training seldom give business planning much thought. I never did. Even those who are educated find it difficult to sit down and map out their future. Most people who start a business do so because they have an idea or see customers with needs they can fill. Some start with a practical working knowledge of the business they go into. Most in the landscape business started mowing lawns while in high school or college as a part-time job or as a way to create a job for themselves. Our business is considered easy-entry. Of course making money in this business, I mean making serious money, is an entirely different matter. For every hundred people who start a landscape business with the best of intentions, only a handful will still be in this line of work 10 years later.

It is incredible to consider the number of people who have either worked for a landscape company while going to school, or who started a landscaping business after school or

when they were out of work, only to leave after a short time for some other line of work. Why did they quit? I figure either they didn't like the work or they liked the work, but couldn't make enough money.

I can understand people leaving the business because they don't like the work. It isn't easy, but there is a reason why most landscape contractors love what they do. They love plants, trees, soil and improving God's creation with well-thought out designs. They love improving and maintaining a property beyond even what the owner thought was possible. This gives them a sense of pride and satisfaction. Despite all the business complexities – the weather, the equipment and the people – they persevere.

But it's a shame for anyone who loves this work to have to give it up because they could not make any money. In most cases they didn't make the money they needed simply because they lacked a vision and a plan. Still others love landscaping and stick with it, while barely eking out a living, also because they don't have a plan.

Bruce Crowle, a good friend from Cheshire, Conn., is a living example of the power of a plan. Today, Bruce and his wife Joanne own Atria, one of the premier interior landscape companies in the state. Atria wasn't Crowle's first company. He started a company named Decora in 1974, but without a plan. He was 23 years old, had a degree in biology and loved plants. Within 10 years he decided to

sell Decora for various reasons. He then started another company, but this time one thing was different.

“I created a great business plan when I started Atria,” Crowle says. “I didn’t know much about business, but I went to CompUSA and bought “BizPlan Builder” off the shelf. It was a huge help in getting me started and directing my business thoughts and plans. Amazingly, I went to a local bank and with zero clients and with only my plan in hand, the bank extended us a \$25,000 line of credit. The banker said that based on the business plan and our experience in the industry he was confident in lending us the money.”

The very act of creating and writing a plan forces you to think. Many do not have a plan because thinking takes time, and they feel it’s better to do than to think. Wrong. You need to do both. If you are too busy doing, then you are not thinking. As *E-Myth* author Michael Gerber says in his best seller, entrepreneurs can easily get caught up working in their business rather than on their business. Are you guilty of that? Do you appreciate the difference between the two?

There is a fairly well known saying that goes, “If you fail to plan, plan to fail.” So what are you going to do about it? It’s never too late to create your business plan. How? Plan to plan. Get your calendar out and set aside one or two days for planning. I strongly suggest engaging the services of a facilitator. Ideally, get someone with green industry experience to help you.

I urge you to develop a written business plan for your company. I did for my company and only wish I had done so years earlier. If you spend some 2,500 hours a year working *in* your company, I am sure you can spare 8 to 16 hours to work *on* your company – to think and plan. My rule of thumb is that you set aside 1 percent of your working time throughout the year to plan for the next 99 percent. Doesn’t that make sense?

Review your accomplishments, identify your current situation and present your future vision. Create a SWOT analysis. In other words, analyze your company Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Get to know and understand your customers, your competition and your people. Once this is done, create an action plan for the next 12 months and put it in writing. Then, share the plan with your employees to get buy in. Make sure your plan is actionable, visible and your people know what it is. Now execute on it!

There are many “how to” books on writing a business plan, so find one that works for you and use it. You do not need to plan in great detail as some books propose, especially books written for manufacturing companies instead of service businesses. Your plan should cover all the important aspects of your business – goals, budgets, people and marketing – but most importantly your plan needs to be truly useful for you, or you simply won’t use it.

One more thing: Refer to your plan at least once a month to make

sure you are on course and doing what you decided is necessary to achieve your goals for that year. It's critical to create measurements – benchmarks that determine the success of the plan. For example, did you reach your budget goals for the quarter? Was the percentage of additional sales per month on target? Did you gain the new customer base you expected for the past months according to plan?

Over time, you'll get more comfortable with the process of planning and your plans will evolve, become more detailed and come together more easily. Trust me, business planning is habit forming. A plan gives you direction for the future and many practical insights. So make a commitment to yourself. Get your calendar right now and mark in the dates you will begin to plan.

TAKE ACTION:

- Set aside 1 percent of your working time throughout the year to plan for the next 99 percent.
- Get your calendar out right now and mark down your planning days.