



From the series for MAGIC Magazine

Part 1: Integrity & Purpose

If you're running a business as a magician, I have some scary statistics for you. More than 90% of all small businesses fail within their first 10 years, around 50% within the first year. Why? I think it's because most people get into business knowing the technical end of the business, but not how to run a business. Here's how this translates to magic: though you might be a great magician, you don't necessarily know much about running a business – and the less you know, the more likely you are to fail.

Let's begin with integrity—not honesty or scrupulousness, but the larger definition of integrity architects and engineers talk about, where all the parts fit together, mutually supporting each other. This is the key to building a strong business. A bridge without integrity is doomed to fail. So, too, with your business. So how do you build a business with integrity? By building on PURPOSE.

Some Questions: What is the core, the heart and soul, of your business? Do you have a clearly defined purpose? What benefits do you provide to your customers? What sets you apart from competitors and makes you unique? Most magicians become professionals because they like doing magic – but that alone is not a strongly defining purpose on which to build a business.

As an example, suppose I'm a stage magician who likes to perform for young people. I might define my purpose as "to provide hip magical entertainment for younger crowds." This might set me apart from some of my competitors, and certainly tells me who my market is. Another performer might decide, "My purpose is to use my magic in order to help young people stay off drugs." This is a stronger purpose and a better basis for a business. Once you've chosen your purpose, many of the other questions you face in your business will be easily answered. You'll know who your audience is, and have a basis for making many of the decisions about the show you will create. You'll have some idea of the kinds of characters you might portray, the effects and stories you might choose, and even the kinds of music you'll use to get your purpose across to that audience. Although your audience is students,

you'll know you need to market your show to guidance counselors, school principals, church pastors, etc. You know you'll be performing in school auditoriums. All of these are crucial things to know about your business.

Being clear about what you're really selling is a major key to your ultimate success or failure. If you're working in the trade show market, for example, what you're selling is your ability to draw a crowd. The person hiring you is probably less concerned with whether you're a good magician than with whether you can draw large crowds to their booth.

Many successful businesses have long formal "mission statements" describing their dedication to excellence and customer service, etc. The problem with many of these mission statements is that once you've read them, you have no idea of what the corporation actually does. They sound great—but they all say the same thing (dedication to excellence, customer service, etc.), and don't say the most important thing, which is what the core of the business is. In "The Art of the Start," Guy Kawasaki suggests, rather than a lengthy mission statement, a three step thought process to get your business off the ground: 1. Make Meaning; 2. Make Mantra; and 3. Get Going. The first two steps replace the traditional Mission Statement.

What does it mean to "make meaning?" When you answer the question, "How does my business make the world a better place?" you're talking about making meaning. Are you helping kids build better lives by staying off drugs? Are you opening minds to new possibilities? Helping people to overcome their personal limitations? It can be as simple as using your magic to bring people a few moments of respite from all the tensions in their lives. Your choice can be lofty or low, but it's important to know: what meaning are you creating with YOUR magic business?

"Mantra," according to Merriam-Webster, is a "mystical formula of invocation." As magicians, we might call it a magical "spell." A mantra must be a distillation of your core purpose that you can repeat to keep yourself on track. Some examples of great business mantras provided by Kawasaki are, "Authentic Athletic Performance" (Nike); "Fun Family Entertainment" (Disney); and "Rewarding Everyday Moments" (Starbucks). I know a magician whose mantra is "Reawaken wonder," and another who is "the ultimate sales machine." Consider what your business mantra should be. Write it out and try it out on friends.

Keep changing it until you feel it is a strong statement of what you and your magic are all about.

Another part of knowing what your business is all about is to set clear goals. Yogi Berra once expressed, with his fractured logic: “You got to be careful if you don’t know where you’re going, because you might not get there.” Where do you want to go with your magic career? Do you have specific five year goals? How about goals for this week, this month, this year? Goals you might consider: how many shows you want to do, how much money do you want to make, how big a show will you have? Once you know the purpose of your business, do you know how you’ll achieve that purpose? Breaking the purpose into a list of goals, and those into a list of smaller goals (steps along the way) will help you lay out your path in doable steps.

You need to take some time and answer all of the above questions. What is the meaning you create with your business? What is your mantra? And what are the specific short and long term goals of that business? Only after you know these answers are you really ready to take the next steps and begin building a strong business – one built with integrity, on the strong base of mission and purpose.

In my next article, I’ll explain more about the structures that create a strong business. In the meantime, spend some time writing out your answers to the various questions raised in this article. We commit to goals more strongly when we write them down, and commitment is extremely important when you embark on the creation (or re-creation) of a business.

Tobias Beckwith has been business, personal and creative manager for Jeff McBride and Marco Tempest for over 20 years. Before that he managed and produced shows on and off-Broadway and for international touring. Beckwith holds an Masters degree in directing for the theatre from the University of Pittsburgh, where he also taught for a time.
