

Five Critical Business Relationships for Entrepreneurs

By Ty Freyvogel

It's often said that business owners are "married to their work." It's true. Running a company requires amazing quantities of time, energy, and devotion. But there is one big difference: while matrimony is all about maintaining a healthy relationship with another person, being married to a business requires you to maintain healthy (and profitable) relationships with multiple groups of people. In fact, there are five main relationships that every small business owner must nurture:

- Customers
- Employees
- Vendors
- Bankers
- Mentors

Smart entrepreneurs never forget their own success is intertwined with a complex network of other people and organizations. All of those relationships must be constantly tended and nurtured. Even though your interaction with each of these five groups will be different, your reason for creating positive relationships with them will be the same—building a successful business.

Here's why your efforts with these people and organizations can make or break your business:

Customers. Of course, any business owner wants his customers to be happy; they're your bread and butter. But you need to ask yourself, "Am I really going that extra mile to ensure that my customers have the ultimate positive experience?" Not only do you want them to be so happy with your service that they keep coming back, you also want them to go tell someone else about how much they loved the experience they had with your business.

Learn as much as you can about your customers, so that when their needs change, you can be the one to provide them with the new services they need—not one of your competitors! Constantly ask them, "How can we continue to provide value for your company?" They'll appreciate your efforts to help them be as successful as possible. Always treat them with the utmost respect and do everything in your power to make them happy. That may mean anything from giving them the occasional discount that's "especially for them" to remembering their kids' birthdays. Take care of all of the little things and not only will your customers come back, they'll bring their friends along.

Employees. Your employees are the face of your organization. Obviously you want to hire the most dedicated, honest, and passionate people you can find. After all, you have to trust

them people to serve your customers, protect your brand, and help your company grow. When you have found the best employees for your business, do everything in your power to keep them. Encourage a sense of ownership among your employees. There's no better way to keep them happy than by giving them the recognition they deserve. Have one-on-one conversations with each of your employees on a regular basis to let them share their problems with you and to give you a chance to recognize their good work. Make sure you find out which jobs within the organization they are the most passionate about and put the right people in those positions. Remember, passion equates to hard work! Nurture your employees to love your business as much as you do and you'll find that your business will be much more likely to survive setbacks and grow to great heights.

Vendors. Think of your vendors as "honorary employees." Although they don't work directly for you they service your company regularly. This includes everyone from the package delivery guy to the materials supplier, to the designer who updates your Website. Show them that you appreciate what they do for you and that you care about them and their companies. Get their e-mail addresses and cell phone numbers and stay in touch with them. You never know when an emergency might arise in which you could use their help. Your company may not always grow 10% a year and that rainy day may well arrive when you have to ask for an extra 30 or 60 days to make your payment. If you already have a good relationship with them, they will be more willing to work with you and help you get back on track. Never treat vendors as if they're serving you. Always acknowledge when they have gone above and beyond the call of duty to make you happy. Strive to make sure your vendors get as much value out of their relationship with you as you do with them.

Bankers. Most businesses require a start-up loan. The best way to nurture your relationship with your banker is to make sure you always have enough money in your account to make your monthly loan payments on time. With my businesses, I always made sure I had some emergency cash saved up to use in case I had a rough month. You don't want to gain a reputation with your bank as someone who doesn't make loan payments on time.

Staying close to your bankers can also help you secure your finances. Make sure you set up a safety system with them to ensure that all of your deposits go through on time. I once had a manager who was embezzling money from one of my businesses. I had a close relationship with my bank and the bank manager noticed that something wasn't adding up with my account. He called me to let me know and we were able to set up the necessary precautions to ensure that no one was ever able to embezzle from me again. Thanks to my close relationship with him, I was able to correct a problem before it became even more costly for me.

Mentors. It's great to have someone to go to when you are first starting your own business and to whom you can turn for advice when you run into problems once it is up and running. Find a successful fellow entrepreneur whom you respect and ask her to be your mentor. Always show her the respect she deserves and let her know you are thankful for her help. It's also a great idea to put your mentor on your business's advisory board. In addition, it's likely that your mentor will have many useful connections. You want to have a close relationship with her so that she is willing to go that extra mile to help you build your business.

Don't contact your mentor only when you have a problem. Keep in touch regularly, even if it is just to give her an update on how things are going. You never know, she might tell you about a contact that could help you in a certain aspect of your business. Always send a thank you note after she's done something to help you—it's a small gesture that has a big impact.

The Bottom Line

No matter how determined, hardworking, and talented you may be, no successful entrepreneur makes it on his or her own. It takes a village to run a company. A clear understanding of that fact is critical to your success.

Always be on the lookout for ways to show your key players that you appreciate them. The more people who care about you and your business, the more successful you're going to be.

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