

When The Bird Cage Lady Sings

Survival through Social Responsibility

My company was on the brink of bankruptcy for nearly three years because my much larger competitor decided to sue me for the sole purpose of destroying my business. Every morning I woke up with a sinking feeling in the pit in my stomach, convinced that this would be the day I would have to give up on the dream that I held so dearly for so many years -- to have a thriving avian business.

My competitor almost won. He cost me millions of dollars in revenues due to legal complications, countless sleepless nights, and hundreds of thousands in lost profits. But in the end he didn't win. He didn't realize that I was playing the "game" of business for a reason much greater than just making profits. I was in this business to realize my vision: *"Every companion bird living in a healthy, loving, stimulating environment."* I was in it for more than money.

My company, Avian Adventures, manufactured beautiful bird cages designed to provide a safe, stimulating environment for birds, and of course for their humans, who wanted nothing but the best for their parrot. Our mission was to create value to our customers through innovation, education, communication and marketing and to enhance the quality of life for all exotic birds. This, I felt, was my social responsibility.

Most people are not aware that bird rescues and sanctuaries are bursting at the seams with parrots who were abandoned largely due to misinformation. Remember the "Dancing Cockatoo" video on You Tube? There are thousands of parrots just like him -- smart, beautiful, and homeless. During my 11 years as owner of Avian Adventures, I saw hundreds of heartbreaking cases of avian abandonment, neglect, and abuse. I served on the boards of several of these sanctuaries and donated a significant amount of our proceeds and product to non-profit organizations whose mission was in alliance with my vision.

So, as hard as my competitor tried to shut me down, my dream of making my living in tandem with my mission kept me going when most people would have thrown in the towel. I'm sure I would not have survived the brutal attack on my business or the years and years of losses, heartache, frustration, missed expectations, wasted time, and wasted money had I been manufacturing paper-clips instead of fabulous homes for beloved parrots. Without my vision, I doubt I would have survived long enough to see a successful resolution to the law suit, or stand by long enough to realize the profitable sale of Avian Adventures in August, 2007, to a company who shared my vision and passion.

VOLUNTEER VELOCITY

When I speak to university students and entrepreneurs about business, I remind them that you never know where your volunteer efforts will take you. Avian Adventures would not have existed had I not served on the board of Pet Industry Distributor's Association (I used to own a distribution company before starting the bird cage company). As a board member, I was in the lucky position to get to know many other influential distributors. I discovered they were looking for a line of large bird cages to sell, but didn't know where to find one. My entrepreneurial wheels began turning and I started Avian Adventures. If I had not been serving as a volunteer on that board, I wouldn't have known about the significant demand for this product.

I have found that when you give your time, wisdom, and insight to others, you experience multitudes of joy and fulfillment, and you put yourself in a position to meet people that may influence your work. Social responsibility within a company ignites passion like nothing else can. Passion, persistence, and success go hand in hand. To quote Oprah Winfrey, "Passion is the log that keeps the fire of purpose blazing." So, when the "game" of business scores points against you, it's much easier to shoot, score, and win when you have played with authenticity and integrity. #

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