From ‘Ow’ to ‘Meow’: A Young Catpreneur Discovers Her Own Meaning of Success

Never start a business to prove your own self-worth. That’s the lesson this entrepreneur learned — the hard way.

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Never start a business to prove your own self-worth. That’s the lesson I learned — the hard way. At age 23, I was living the high life in Washington, D.C., with a good corporate job, and plenty of free time to shop, travel and party.

On the inside, though, I felt lower than low. I was making money, but not making a difference. I hated my job and I felt like I was wasting my potential. Then I hit upon a plan.

An avid traveler, I decided to take a trip to Thailand and volunteer at an elephant sanctuary. I've always loved animals, so I took a break to volunteer with those glorious creatures and to explore a different part of the world, in order to get my "soul back." I felt that corporate America had sucked it right out of me.

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Getting hands-on with elephants on that trip reminded me of what was really important to me. My travel buddies noticed my passion for these animals, as well, so for my birthday, they took me to a place they knew I would love: a cat cafe in Chiang Mai, called Catmosphere. There, as I celebrated my 24th year of life, surrounded by friends and felines, I fell in love – with an idea.

Why not open a cat cafe back home? I wondered. *Why not combine my love of animals with my belief that businesses can have a positive impact in a way that traditional charities can't?*

On my flight home, I began working on my new idea. I could already see how cat cafes in America could work. We could partner with local rescues to provide a humane, caring environment for cats while bringing cat-loving customers in to hang out and enjoy the company of homeless cats. Customers could also adopt cats if they fell in love, which would mean higher adoption rates and lower euthanasia rates for cats in shelters.

Back on the ground, I soon quit my corporate job and started a Kickstarter campaign to test and fund my vision. I raised my entire goal of $15,000 within hours. Three months later, I opened the doors to my dream-come-true business: Washington, D.C.'s first and only cat cafe, Crumbs & Whiskers.

It was a hit, raking in $22,000 on its first day, and attracting long lines of customers.

Ironically, though, that’s when the trouble started. There were plenty of cats and excited customers, so what could possibly be the problem? Yet there it was. The problem was that I didn’t know how to handle that kind of success, and I didn’t have much help. For me, my success was too much, and too fast. The entire city was talking about us; we had hundreds of customers every day … and I had no idea how to manage the demand.

What’s more, our customer reviews were awful, because the place was a non-stop mess, and we were so busy we had no time to clean things up.

For the next few months, I actively worked to do something most entrepreneurs can’t imagine – keep my business out of the spotlight, while stabilizing things internally. The business started becoming more manageable, and our reviews got a lot better. I thought I’d be happy once things stabilized, but within weeks of my new-found stability, I felt my ambition taking over once again. *It’s time to open a second one,* I thought!

The price of success

Within two years, I had two cat cafes going: the one in D.C., and a second one in Los Angeles; and my new company was bringing in seven figures in annual revenue. I should have been happy with two successful cafes, but I wasn’t. Somehow, the more the business succeeded, the more my life spiraled downward.

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I was miserable. I was burned out. My life became a broken tangle of depression, anxiety, insomnia, stress, loneliness, worthlessness and pain. Success didn’t bring me the happiness I’d thought it would. Instead, I found myself in the darkest

place I had ever been.

And I wasn’t the only unhappy one. My employees were just as down. I had grown my company too fast, and burned everyone out. Then, in one horrendous week, all my management quit, and so did many of my employees. This awakened me to the fact that not only had I not taken care of myself, I hadn’t taken care of them, either.

I admit to myself: “I’m not okay. I need help.”

For that help, I turned to my business coach, who recommended I start therapy. Luckily for me, she could also be my therapist! I hired and trained new employees to stabilize the business once again, then hit the pause button to focus on myself. I made managing Crumbs & Whiskers my part-time gig, and personal healing my new full-time job.

With the help of my mentor, I started untangling a lifetime of trauma: abandonment by my parents and my family’s disappointment in me; bullying; sexual assault; and the challenges immigrants like me – I had come here from India – so often face: not knowing how to fit in to our new lives in the United States.

I realized why nothing in my business or life felt like it was enough. No amount of success, money, recognition was sufficient –because inside me, I didn’t feel that *I* was enough. The more my business succeeded, the more worthless I felt.

Thankfully, my coach and therapist helped me turn my business and life around. As my therapist, she helped me change my relationship with myself. She helped me realize I had a giant hole inside, and I was trying to fill it with success. But success could never fill that hole.

As my coach, she was a lifesaver once more: She helped me turn my business around, develop my leadership skills and change my beliefs about what success means. At our cafe, a fluorescent sign flickers on one of the walls: a four-letter word, with two letters on top and two on the bottom. The top row says “me” and the bottom row says “ow” – standing in, of course, for “meow” – but the combination sometimes reminds me not of the sounds our adorable felines make but of the pain I went through on my journey of entrepreneurship and healing.

From that roller coaster journey, I learned nine key takeaways that are so important to all entrepreneurs:

● Take care of yourself. That’s your biggest responsibility.

● Spend time healing. The path to building a great business is through becoming a great person.

● Success is a surprise, and so is failure. So, don’t expect either. Just focus on giving it your best shot.

● If you’re not happy, that means you’re not fulfilled. If you’re not fulfilled, it’s time to pause and reflect on why.

● Create a business that reflects who you are – a business that truly reflects your values.

● Find a great mentor who can guide you on your journey.

● Do what you love and don’t worry about what everyone else is doing.

● Follow your dreams, no matter how wild and crazy they are.

● Learn to admire yourself and your own work. If you don’t learn that, nothing you ever accomplish will be enough.

After committing to healing, I decided to not grow my business anymore, at least not until I felt ready. But then came a spark of hope: I knew my inner entrepreneur was back when I

had my latest idea: America’s first pop-up Kitten Lounge in Washington, D.C. My goal: To save 500 kittens from euthanasia while giving people an amazing experience.

My pop-up, Kitten Lounge, will open in D.C. in early March, coinciding with the annual springtime influx of stray kittens that overloads animal shelters. Nationwide, shelters simply cannot handle the cost and responsibility for their care, and tens of thousands are euthanized. My solution aims to help Washington, D.C., shelters – as well as the innocent kittens themselves.

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The night I had this idea was the first time in years I once again felt electricity running through my veins. The idea made me excited, passionate, happy. But I also noticed something different about *me*: For the first time, it didn’t matter to me whether my plan became the next big thing or not. It didn’t matter whether this would be a “million dollar idea” or a “massively scalable” business. I just knew it would help save animals and that there was a market for it.

And that was enough. It was a beautiful moment feeling finally that *I* was enough, and what I was *doing* was enough – and that that was all that mattered.

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