I Launched a PR Agency Even Though I'd Never Wanted to Start a Business

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As a teenager, I tried everything: community theater, basketball, cross-country skiing, social work, hours and hours of piano lessons, Aikido, horseback riding. This information is relevant because as a 20-something young professional, I remained the same multi-passionate teenager at heart, which made it quite a challenge to "follow my passion" after quitting my only office job.

As a true millennial, I was determined to find a job that I'm passionate about so "I don't have to work another day in my life" as per a famous motivational quote. Because we millennials consider those quotes a solid source of serious life advice.

That's where the experience of a million extracurricular activities from my teen years finally came in handy. No, not for resume writing. Thanks to seven years in piano school, three months at horseback riding, and two weeks at Aikido, I knew this much: Some passions last and others don't because the reality is nothing like you'd imagined.

At that time, I couldn't quite afford to go all-in with a new career or business just to find out if I liked the idea of it and not the actual day-to-day. I needed a way to know for sure.

That’s where the idea of career split testing came into play.

See, in my professional life, I only had one office job, and my role was to split test large marketing campaigns. If you are not familiar with the process, it’s about is taking a new marketing idea and trying it on a small sample of your leads. Then, using statistics, you calculate whether or not this idea would make a significant improvement if implemented on a company-wide level. There are few principles to make this methodology work, which turned out to be very useful in career split testing as well.

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You always need to start with a hypothesis

In the marketing world, it would be something like “If I replace this long-copy sales page with a video sales letter, more people would watch, more people would buy and my conversion rate will increase.” In the case of career split-testing, I’d come up with hypotheses like, “I would enjoy a career as a full-time artist,” “I can make a career as a freelance journalist” or “organizing events can become my next thing.”

By the way, running my own business was never on the list.

You need to understand which metrics you are testing and have clear measures

While in marketing my team and I would usually measure conversions, my real-life split testing was aimed at one factor only: whether it would last. Remembering my teenage

years, I knew that something might seem like the coolest thing to do when you watch others doing it. However, not all of those activities remained exciting after I tried them out. In Aikido class, I was the only 14-year-old girl surrounded by older and much larger men. That did not work. Horseback riding was exciting until the first fall, and I was obviously way too short to be a basketball player.

I wasn't afraid of challenges; I just needed the right challenges to take on. For example, when I found a school of journalism, commuting for two hours and changing a few buses wasn't an issue. Even at minus 30 degrees Celsius. That was a passion that lasted. So now, testing possible careers, I knew I needed to really try things, allow myself to face real challenges and see if after facing them, the initial hypothesis still appeared fun. My career testing was around the durability of passion if you can consider it a metric.

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You need to make sure that experiments don't interfere with business as usual

That's a big one. Allow me to explain using a marketing example once again. Let's say I'm working in an ecommerce store and develop a hypothesis that placing the CEO's face on the checkout will increase customer trust. Hypotheses are often wrong. And that's a good thing. Every wrong hypothesis teaches you something. But to save a business from fatal mistakes, tests are run on a small portion of the audience. You might have experienced beta testing, where you suddenly get a new feature on your favorite app, but your friend doesn't. That means you've been added to a test that the developers are running. If it succeeds, your friend will get a feature too. If it fails, it won't kill their business.

What does this principle mean for career testing? Well, in my case, it was about being able to pay bills while still experimenting. I did it by drawing the line between the projects that were meant to bring cash and projects that were meant to get me closer to understanding what I actually want to do with my life.

It brought a lot of clarity. For my “cash projects,” I picked up a few consulting gigs. It was okay to pick projects that I wasn’t passionate about. That made searching for gigs easier: good old selling of expertise, with none of that millennial “passion” and “impact” talk.

On the other hand, the passion projects were allowed to pay little. Or not pay at all, or even dig into my pocket a little. I wasn’t stressed about paying for 70 coffees for attendees of my first creative meetup out of my own pocket. I knew that finding a long-lasting passion would be worth more than that.

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Implementing the results

Just like that, I spent about 18 months paying the bills through not-exciting consulting gigs. I was trying my hand at all the new areas, from freelance writing to community building. It wasn’t a sustainable lifestyle, but proved to be a very efficient way to systematize finding my one passion before fully banking all of my time on it.

That’s how one day I came up with a new hypothesis: “Maybe I’ll enjoy doing PR and sharing stories of people that inspire me.”

This needed some testing ground, so I found a story I wanted to tell. It was a story of a couple I’d recently met: They sailed full-time around the Indian Ocean, filming a

documentary about the lives of people in remote places. The story came out beautifully and got about 11,000 views.

The thing about true passion is that it takes your life over like a storm. I found myself slowly dropping my consulting gigs to make room for more PR experiments. And then, eventually, I dropped other passion projects because I wouldn’t get bored day after day in search of new stories and ways to share them.

The experiment has finally worked out and completely taken over my life. I never wanted to start a business. In the beginning, I never considered that what I’d start would turn into an agency. I guess I still don’t know the final destination of this experiment. One thing is certain though: I still try to follow the principles that led me here within my agency. I design hypotheses about business growth, make sure I can measure their impact and look for ways to try new things without interfering with business as usual.

I’m confident that this approach can be used in so many areas of your life and business, from investing and scaling a business to dating and choosing a place to live.

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