Why Marketing Agencies and Consultants Are Struggling Right Now — and How They Can Turn Things Around

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I run a boutique marketing agency, but despite our agency size, we work with some notable brands and growing, funded startups, but I am not going to sugarcoat it. Business has been slow. Earlier this year, we had a couple of clients who "put marketing on pause" despite the good metrics we were getting them, and a manufacturing client literally backed down from a contract because of the tariffs.

At first, I took things a bit personally, but then when I connected with other fellow agency owners and consultants, I noticed that many of them were going through the same thing at some level, at least on the marketing side.

The truth is that we're at an inflection point. The forces reinventing marketing are not merely external; they're structural. Economic shifts are the main driver, but also AI disruptions, talent trends and evolving client expectations are fundamentally altering the way value is delivered.

Let's analyze a bit more.

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Budgets are shrinking. Expectations aren’t.

Economic indicators have been blinking yellow for a while. Persistent inflation, tariffs and international trade uncertainty, and increasing expenses are making marketing leaders hesitant to make firm, long-term commitments. In response, brands are reducing or freezing their expenditures and putting emphasis on demonstrating the worth of each dollar.

Marketing agencies and consultants are feeling this impact across the board. Progress is no longer good enough. Clients need to see how your work is impacting the pipeline, sales and long-term growth. That equates to less experimentation and more emphasis on performance.

AI is changing the game

There is no question about AI’s power. It can create content and code, analyze performance and suggest campaign optimization. Several services that agencies once charged a premium for are now performed in-house or by automation software.

Additionally, the hype around AI tends to outpace reality. This creates client doubt, price pressure and difficult questions regarding where human value still adds up. Spoiler: It still does. But you must deliver something AI can’t: strategic thought, real-world experience, subtle storytelling and intelligent execution linked to outcomes.

Workplace models continue to

evolve, and it’s generating tension

A few clients are back in the office. A few teams are remote-first. Others are somewhere in between. And though that all sounds great in theory — but in practice, it’s proving problematic.

Agencies are being called on to interact more face to face. Face-to-face meetings, strategy sessions and embeds are back, particularly with enterprise accounts. Meanwhile, it’s gotten harder to attract and retain top talent. People desire flexibility, yet clients want face time. It isn’t simple to balance these demands, compelling agency leaders to reconsider their hiring models and geographic scope.

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Commoditization is real

A few years ago, simply having the skill and technology to launch a campaign or email program gave you an edge. That’s no longer true today.

As martech platforms and AI tools proliferate, more brands have solid internal teams. Agencies can no longer just be functional experts. What clients really need now is insight, market context, tighter positioning, creative thinking and a point of view they can’t get in-house.

Specialization isn’t optional anymore

We’re seeing a strong trend away from generalist agencies and toward highly specialized partners. Whether it’s B2B SaaS, financial services, healthcare or multicultural strategy, clients desire teams that really understand their industry.

You don’t necessarily need to concentrate on a single industry, but you do need to define a niche, a vertical, a channel or a methodology. The “we do it all” days are giving way to “we do this, and we do it better than anybody else.”

Data measurement and privacy only get more complicated

Regulatory pressure is building. With GDPR, CCPA and cookie deprecation, the traditional method of tracking performance and targeting audiences is eroding. For agencies, that creates a twofold challenge: staying compliant and delivering insights in an environment where data is harder to obtain and less precise.

This means reimagining analytics strategies, investing in clean data practices and guiding clients through a more privacy-centric environment without sacrificing effectiveness.

SEO and organic marketing are changing rapidly

AI-driven results, such as Google’s SGE or AI mode, ChatGPT and Perplexity being used as search engines, are altering the way users search for and consume information. At the same time, the web is awash in AI-created copy — a little of it good, most of it bad.

The moral is clear: Content volume is no longer enough. Brands must produce original content and produce it with skill. Agencies that help clients build genuine authority founded on quality, relevance and consistency will prosper, while those focused on quick victories will be lost in the din.

Talent is elusive and costly

The war for talent continues unabated. Leading strategists, creatives, media planners and analysts are costly, and they are aware of it. Meanwhile, clients are pushing back on fees.

This reality squeezes agency margins and compels difficult discussions on staffing, automation and the degree of service actually viable. Intelligent companies are creating leaner organizations, tighter briefs and more streamlined operations without sacrificing quality.

Sustainability and global stability are now core issues

Clients are under growing pressure to meet obligations around sustainability, social responsibility and ethical business. That means their agency partners need to reflect those values as well. Add to that the geopolitical risks – wars, trade interruptions, regulatory shifts – strategic marketing needs to be as much about risk management as growth driving.

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Outcomes are more important than ever, even when you don’t have total control

Clients want tangible outcomes, not just activity. However, agencies and consultants do not always have full control over what gets implemented. Internal delays, under-resourced teams and poor execution can all detract from performance. Nevertheless, external partners are still held to the same high standards of delivery.

This is why early clarity is so essential. Clear definition of

scope, realistic expectation management and agreement on timings are all critical. Those agencies that can conduct these discussions with confidence and openness will be the ones who can maintain trust when results are harder to achieve.

If you are running a marketing agency or consulting firm, here is the takeaway: 2025 is not business as usual. It is about agility and doubling down on what you're most valuable at, but also "back-to-school" time — catching up with AI and other trends in order to build a more sustainable business model.

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How One Man Conquered the World’s Toughest Peaks — and Built a Brand Every Founder Should Study

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After conquering the world’s 14 toughest peaks in record time, Nepali-born Nims Purja rose as a bold voice for the often-overlooked Sherpa guides. In the process, he became the first true celebrity mountaineer of the social media era — and one of the most debated figures in the global climbing scene.

His path wasn’t paved with venture funding or viral hacks — it was carved out with ice axes, discipline and a refusal to accept the limits others set. Purja is not just a climber; he’s an entrepreneur of his own brand, built atop grit, story and bold vision. His journey offers timeless insights for anyone aiming to build a global presence and leave a legacy.

Dare to dream bigger

By climbing all 14 of the world’s 8,000-meter peaks in just six months and six days — a feat that previously took others nearly a decade — he didn’t compete within the old standards; he created a new one entirely. For entrepreneurs, the lesson is clear: Don’t aim to improve marginally on what’s been done — dare to redefine the game itself.

Apply the 10x framework: Instead of asking “How can we improve by 10%?” challenge yourself to ask “How can we deliver 10x the value?” A local restaurant shouldn’t just aim to be “better.” They should ask: “How can we create an experience so unique that customers travel 30 minutes just to eat here?” Take 30 minutes this week to list your current business goals, then rewrite each one using 10x thinking.

When you operate with bold vision, relentless execution and unapologetic ambition, you don’t just enter the market — you reshape it. Purja’s example teaches founders that category leadership doesn’t come from incrementalism; it comes from delivering results so extraordinary that they spark a global conversation.

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Own your narrative

Purja’s rise to global prominence wasn’t just about his physical feats — it was also about how masterfully he told his story. Through his book *Beyond Possible*, the Netflix documentary *14 Peaks* and a consistent, personal presence on Instagram, Purja controlled the narrative of his journey, spotlighting not just his own achievements but also celebrating his team, clients and fellow Nepali climbers.

Master the three-channel system: Choose one primary social platform where you’ll post daily, add one long-form medium (blog, newsletter or LinkedIn articles) for weekly deep-dives, and secure one multimedia opportunity monthly (podcast, video or speaking engagement). Use the 70-30 rule: 70% behind-the-scenes process content, 30% final results.

Importantly, when faced with allegations of misconduct in 2024, Purja used his platforms to respond directly, transparently and on his own terms.

Prepare your crisis playbook now: When facing criticism, respond within 24 hours using this framework: Listen to the concerns (take 24 hours to process), acknowledge any valid points, respond with facts and your next steps, then follow through publicly. The lesson for entrepreneurs is powerful: In today's digital age, owning your narrative means owning your audience, your brand and your resilience.

Transfer skills across domains

One of the most underrated superpowers in entrepreneurship is the ability to transfer skills across domains. Purja's background in the British Gurkhas and the U.K.'s elite Special Boat Service wasn't just a footnote in his story; it was the foundation. The discipline, decision-making under pressure, team cohesion and mental fortitude he developed in the military directly fueled his success in extreme mountaineering.

Complete a skills audit: Take two hours this month to map your previous experiences. Create three columns: your past career or major experience, the specific skills you developed and how each could differentiate your current business. Focus on skills your competitors likely don't have — these become your unfair advantage. A former teacher launching a business might leverage lesson planning abilities for customer onboarding, while an ex-military professional could apply tactical decision-making frameworks to client strategy sessions.

Entrepreneurs often overlook the value of their past experiences — whether it's a former career in a different industry, a side hobby or even personal challenges — but it's often these very experiences that spark breakthrough ideas or create a unique edge. That unusual blend of backgrounds becomes your unfair advantage. Innovation doesn't always require inventing something new; sometimes, it's about repurposing what you already know in a way the world hasn't

seen before. The key is to recognize the transferable gold in your own journey and have the courage to apply it boldly in new arenas.

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Monetize with meaning

Books, talks, gear, coaching — these aren't just revenue streams; they're powerful brand extensions that reinforce your story and values. Purja turned his mountaineering journey into a multifaceted brand by writing a bestselling book (*Beyond Possible*), starring in a Netflix documentary, launching branded gear and offering high-end expeditions and coaching experiences. Each extension aligns with his core narrative of resilience, pushing limits and elevating others — strengthening his personal brand and expanding his reach.

Build the four-stream model: Structure your revenue as 60% core service, 20% educational content (courses, books, workshops), 15% physical products or branded items and 5% high-value consulting or group programs. Start by perfecting your core offering and documenting your process. Then, in month two, create your first educational product — an eBook, video series or workshop. Month three, launch one branded physical item. By month six, add a premium consulting or mastermind component.

Small businesses can apply this same approach, even on a modest scale. A local fitness studio could publish an eBook on home workouts, host online wellness webinars, sell branded apparel and offer one-on-one coaching for clients looking to build sustainable fitness habits. A bakery might launch a recipe blog, host virtual baking classes, sell branded tools like aprons or spatulas and speak at local events about entrepreneurship or sustainability.

The key is to create extensions that tell your story in different formats — whether it's education, merchandise or experiences — so your audience engages with your brand on multiple levels. When done thoughtfully, these extensions don't just generate income — they deepen loyalty and turn your business into a lifestyle.

Root in purpose

Purja's rise wasn't just about personal glory — it was about collective recognition. From the start, he made it clear that his mission wasn't only to break records but to uplift the often-uncredited heroes of Himalayan climbing: the Sherpas and Nepali guides who have long risked their lives on the world's highest peaks like Everest without global recognition. By intentionally sharing the spotlight, forming all-Nepali climbing teams and using his media platforms to name and celebrate others, Purja shifted the narrative from individual achievement to collective pride.

Apply the 20% rule: Dedicate one-fifth of your content and platform to highlighting others in your ecosystem. Create a monthly rotation: Week 1, feature a team member; Week 2, spotlight a supplier or partner; Week 3, showcase a customer success story; Week 4, amplify someone in your industry who deserves recognition. Track engagement rates on these posts versus self-promotional content — you'll often find that generous content performs better.

For entrepreneurs, this is a powerful lesson: Your platform is not just a megaphone for your success — it's a tool for impact. Whether it's amplifying the voices of overlooked teammates, underrepresented communities in your industry or emerging talent in your field, using your influence to lift others builds long-term credibility, loyalty and brand depth. In a world that values authenticity and purpose, advocacy isn't just the right thing to do — it's also a strategic move

that differentiates you as a leader with vision and heart.

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Becoming a global superstar isn’t just about talent – it’s about vision

Purja’s rise reminds us that superstardom doesn’t come from chasing fame – it comes from chasing the extraordinary and bringing others with you. Whether you’re building a startup, a personal brand or a social movement, the path to global recognition is paved with authenticity, audacity and advocacy.

Your 90-day implementation plan: Start with one framework this month – perhaps the skills audit or three-channel narrative system. Master it over 30 days, measuring your progress weekly. Month two, add the four-stream revenue approach or 20% advocacy strategy. By month three, integrate 10x thinking into your biggest business challenge. Each framework builds upon the others, creating a comprehensive approach to authentic growth.

The question isn’t whether you can reach the summit – it’s whether you’re ready to believe the summit isn’t high enough.

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‘We’ve Served Over 2 Million’: Their Milkshake Went Viral and Helped This Local Burger Joint Grow Into a Global Brand

In 2015, Julie Mulligan and her husband Chris Barish opened Black Tap, a laid-back burger joint in New York City’s SoHo. “It was inspired by the images and music we grew up with: Warhol, Basquiat, ’80s and ’90s hip hop and pop,” Mulligan told *Entrepreneur.*

Since its launch, Black Tap has expanded nationally and globally, thanks in part to its viral social media-friendly CrazyShakes.

As the company announced new iterations of the brand — Tender Crush, a crispy chicken concept at the Rio in Vegas, in SoHo, and at Terminal 8 in JFK this fall; and Singles & Doubles, a fast-casual burger concept also coming to JFK’s Terminal 8 — we spoke with Mulligan, Black Tap’s CEO, about how they’ve managed to stand out in a crowded fast-casual market.

What inspired you to create this business?
We opened Black Tap 10 years ago, thinking a burger joint would be a nice addition to the neighborhood. We went on to win a handful of awards for our burgers and shakes that same year and in early 2016 our CrazyShakes ‘broke the internet.” The rise of social media and sharing food and drink online right around the same time as our launch allowed us to quickly

get exposure on a whole new level. Our “aha moment” was seeing regular three-hour lines down the block and around the corner. We quickly realized we needed more seats, and we’ve been set on bringing the experience to people around the globe ever since. We’ve served over 10 million guests, 5 million burgers, and 2 million CrazyShakes, which blows our minds!

In terms of marketing, can you share your process for effectively embracing social media?
It’s always changing. Two core principles to keep in mind are 1) the need to find your authentic voice and style to stand out in a sea of infinite content, and 2) connection with community and engagement is critical.

Who are some of the A-listers you’ve heard from over the years?
Millie Bobby Brown, Katie Holmes and her daughter, Brooke Shields, Ja Rule, Kristin Chenoweth, Vanessa Hudgens, Greg Norman, and Michael Strahan are just some of the numerous bold-face names we’ve been fortunate enough to come by.

Related: Michael Strahan Shares the Mindset That Drives His Success

What has been the deciding factor in your expansion?
While we started our expansion out of necessity, we’ve gone on to seek out iconic locations around the world. We aim to be accessible and desirable to a mix of locals, business, tourists, and social patrons.

What advice would you give entrepreneurs looking for funding?
As you’re developing your business plan and pitch, put yourself in the shoes of someone who has no understanding or interest in your business. If you can make a compelling case to them why it’s a good investment, then you should be off to a good start.

Related: How to Secure the Funding You Need for Your Startup

What does the word “entrepreneur” mean to you?
It means wearing a lot of hats and playing a lot of roles on a day-to-day basis. It’s a blessing in the sense that you are always learning, it’s never dull, and there’s always something new. It’s also a 24/7 role where you’re never fully on vacation.

What is something many aspiring business owners think they need that they really don’t?
You’ll never have everything 100% figured out, so don’t delay waiting for that moment to come. Do it now. Actions speak louder than words. The game is never over until you stop playing.

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John and Hank Green Built a Company That Gives Away 100% of Its Profits — Here's How

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Even the staunchest capitalists acknowledge the tension between profit and social good. In a consumer-driven society, money often overshadows morals.

Many founders claim their companies exist to make a difference, but in a system that prioritizes profits, good intentions are easily squeezed out. The Green brothers stand out as rare exceptions.

Award-winning authors and YouTube trailblazers Hank and John Green have a storied history of supporting global health causes. At first, they did so by raising awareness with their platform. Now, the always innovative brothers are trying a more active form of philanthropy.

Their latest venture, Good Store, is taking social justice to a new level, selling sustainable, quality products and donating 100% — yes, 100% — of profits to charity.

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Image Credit: Good Store

The Fault in Our Systems

While the Green brothers are best known for their bestselling novels and educational YouTube videos that have guided countless high school students, philanthropy is quite literally in their DNA. They grew up in a family deeply rooted in nonprofit work: their father worked at The Nature Conservancy, while their mother was a community activist.

“Our parents are never proud of us when we accomplish anything other than giving money away,” John jokes.

Early in his career, John worked at a tertiary care children’s

hospital as a student chaplain – an experience that proved to be immeasurably formative.

“Every kid who came into that place received excellent care,” he recalls. “It wasn’t perfect, and the outcomes weren’t always what people wanted, but everyone had a chance.”

In 2011, brothers John and Hank Green launched the educational YouTube channel Crash Course. During that period, they became increasingly interested in global health equity, often brainstorming ways to support what John describes as “long-term interventions.”

“I think I was probably a little more passive in my early activism,” John recalls. “But around the time of the success of The Fault in Our Stars, I realized I now had time – not just money, but also other resources – that I could use.”

One of those resources was the small online merch store the brothers had started in 2008. They decided to direct its revenue toward improving healthcare in Sierra Leone, one of the world’s most impoverished nations.

“It’s easy to feel paralyzed when trying to address the world’s problems – they’re endless, and horrors abound in every direction,” John says. “For us, the goal was to make a long-term investment in one community, so we could see the kind of positive change that unfolds over time.”

Their first step was to consult trusted peers, asking who was doing the most effective work in these communities. Again and again, one name came up: Partners In Health, an organization they had already supported through their annual charity event, Project for Awesome.

The brothers called them up, asking if they were interested in a more formal partnership, and the rest is history.

“When we started providing support to the maternal healthcare

system in Sierra Leone, about one in 17 women were dying during pregnancy or childbirth," John says. "Today, it's closer to one in 53. Our contribution is only a tiny part of that progress – most of the credit goes to the Sierra Leonean government and the Sierra Leonean people – but being able to play even a small role is a reminder that life doesn't merely suck."

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From Paper Towns to real impact

In addition to material health in Sierra Leone, Good Store also supports causes like TB treatment in Lesotho, and coral reef restoration – all powered by the sales of everyday products like socks, underwear and soap.

"We're trying to create more ethical ways to consume the things you have to consume," John says. "People need these essentials, so we want to offer them at a fair price, but with a different business model."

Shockingly, this model doesn't exactly have investors tripping over themselves to join on. After all, the economic ROI of a company that donates all of its profits after breaking even isn't exactly enticing to traditional capitalists.

That means the brothers rely on their own money and investments from a few close friends to fund the business.

"The deal is that we break even, and the rest of the money goes to charity," John explains. "In the narrow sense, is that a good investment? No. But like, I've had investments that didn't break even."

While he admits to hearing out "socially conscious" venture capitalists over the years, John believes the company doesn't require outside money to be successful.

“We’ve been growing steadily for the last 15 years, and I’m comfortable with that pace,” he says. “Having capital to accelerate growth would be exciting, but it would also come with strings I’m not comfortable with.”

Conclusion

Success for Good Store means more than just a positive profit margin. It means funding treatment for the 1.5 million people who die of tuberculosis each year, and helping lower maternal mortality rates in Sierra Leone.

The world may not be a wish-granting factory, but for countless people around the globe, Good Store comes remarkably close.

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Corporate Whole Foods Staff Will Soon Receive Employment Offers From Amazon

Amazon is completing its takeover of Whole Foods, eight years after buying the grocery brand for $13.7 billion.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Wednesday that on Nov. 10, Amazon plans to give new job offers to U.S. Whole Foods corporate employees, complete with new titles, salaries, and

benefits.

The affected employees work in positions ranging from merchandising to marketing, and will be offered a month to review the new compensation packages, according to the report.

Under the new job offers, corporate Whole Foods employees will gain Amazon discounts and healthcare benefits, but lose perks, including four weeks of remote work a year. Amazon implemented a return-to-office mandate requiring five days a week in the office beginning in January.

Related: Some Whole Foods Locations Are Experiencing Empty Shelves After a Main Distributor Was Hacked

Additionally, Whole Foods corporate workers will receive Amazon stock instead of an annual bonus, starting next year. Corporate employees will keep a 20% discount at Whole Foods stores for a year, but lose the perk in 2027.

Amazon bought Whole Foods in 2017 and offers a discount to shoppers with Amazon Prime subscriptions. It has also implemented its technology to make stores available for Amazon package pickups and returns.

Since the acquisition, Whole Foods has increased sales by more than 40% and expanded its footprint from 467 stores in 2017 to 535 stores in October 2024, per *The Business Journals*.

Amazon previously allowed Whole Foods staff to keep their job titles and their benefits. Whole Foods even had its own dedicated CEO, Jason Buechel, until January, when Amazon expanded his responsibilities to include Amazon Fresh grocery stores and Amazon Go convenience stores. Buechel is now Amazon's vice president of worldwide grocery.

Related: 'I Hate Bureaucracy': Leaked Internal Amazon Document Reveals How the Tech Giant Is Cutting Down on Middle Management

In a leaked meeting in June for Amazon’s grocery team, Buechel said that internal bureaucracy slows down Amazon’s grocery business and holds the team back. He mentioned that it was “taking too long” for spending approvals and other decisions to occur.

“Ultimately, we’re wasting time,” Buechel said at the meeting. “It’s taking too long for decisions and approvals to take place, and it’s actually holding back some of our initiatives.”

Whole Foods falls under Amazon’s physical stores segment, which also includes Amazon Fresh and Amazon Go stores. During the second quarter of 2025, Amazon’s physical stores generated $5.6 billion in sales, a 7% increase from the same time last year.

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What I Learned About Business Growth From 5 Successful Founders Who Started Small

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Starting a business with limited resources is a road many solopreneurs find familiar – myself included. I've observed many small business owners turning modest startups into success stories, but it doesn't happen overnight. They turn their humble ideas into successful ventures with resilience, creativity, smart technology use and a never-accept-defeat attitude.

For this article, I'll draw on my personal experiences and the stories of five founders who started small. These practical lessons apply to your entrepreneurship journey as well.

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Start by solving authentic problems

Sara Blakely launched Spanx in 2000 when she was under 30 years old and had $5,000 to her name. But her self-employment journey started with a simple notion: her personal frustration with not finding comfortable, flattering undergarments to wear. Even though her idea, which later turned out to be worth $1 billion, was rejected by multiple manufacturers, her conviction kept her persistent until she finally found someone willing to take a chance on her.

Her story tells me that entrepreneurs must start with a

problem they’re actually familiar with and deeply understand. Authenticity resonates with your core audience; it builds trust from day one. When your product stems from your own experiences and frustrations, you create an immediate connection with your would-be buyers, leading to strong word-of-mouth.

Turn setbacks into stepping stones

Calling himself a lousy employee, Mark Cuban admits that keeping a steady job was difficult for him. But Cuban never quit on himself and ultimately founded and sold MicroSolutions for $6 million. What I learn from his example is that setbacks are inevitable — and necessary. What matters is how quickly you bounce back from failure and what lessons you learn from your past mistakes.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics states that 20% of small businesses shut down in a year or so. But successful solopreneurs treat these setbacks as experiments. When you start treating obstacles as stepping stones, you can easily adapt after failure and launch a working product.

Launch small and use what you have

Fubu’s founder, Daymond John, started this fashion brand in the 1990s by sewing hats and shirts in his mother’s living room. He didn’t have big budgets or state-of-the-art facilities. But he relied on grassroots marketing and community support to end up selling $6 billion worth of products by 2024, turning a kitchen-based hustle into a global fashion powerhouse.

John’s story tells me that a lack of capital shouldn’t hold solopreneurs back. Instead, they should fall back on their skills, their immediate network and whatever resources are available at hand. Grit and creativity often outweigh money.

This lesson speaks to me personally, since I built Selzy with a minimal viable product while relying on customer feedback for improvement.

Related: Building Your Business With Limited Resources? Here's the Mindset You Need to Succeed.

Embrace digital-first and lean growth

Automation, social media and efficient scaling. That's how anyone can launch on budgets under $10,000. Technology lets small businesses thrive and expand into other markets. You can use email marketing tools to reach out to potential leads and advertise your business. Syed Balkhi's WPForms is a great example here. Balkhi's WordPress tutorial blog led to the creation of a $1 billion software company, and he did all that without raising a single dollar of his own.

That's how many modern-day solopreneurs are scaling past six figures. Technology allows founders to go global earlier than was possible a decade ago. Smart customer segmentation and personalized communication help them drive more engagement. And with the right tools, even small teams working remotely can achieve impressive growth with fewer resources.

Turn your mistakes into learning opportunities

Sophia Amoruso's example teaches us to fuel our future successes with past failure. When her startup, Nasty Gal, became shaky after turning into a $100-million brand, she simply pivoted and launched another brand, Girlboss, a platform focused on redefining success for a new generation of women.

Solopreneurs must always be ready to reinvent and adapt to changing consumer demands to position their business for long-term relevancy and success. Accepting that *my idea didn't work* helps you thrive in a competitive industry.

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Put all these real-life lessons into action

Growth is about your vision, resilience and continuous learning — the sign of a solopreneur who is ready to bend to fluctuating market standards and customer expectations. In fact, my experience with digital marketing and AI-powered growth tells me that these principles are universally applicable.

Starting small isn't a limitation for future-ready solopreneurs; it's an opportunity to build strong foundations. It's not how big you start (some of the world's biggest brands were started by their founders in garages), but you keep learning and moving forward. I've tasted defeat and I've met setbacks — I recommend adaptability.

Starting a business with limited resources is a road many solopreneurs find familiar — myself included. I've observed many small business owners turning modest startups into success stories, but it doesn't happen overnight. They turn their humble ideas into successful ventures with resilience, creativity, smart technology use and a never-accept-defeat attitude.

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No More Non-Competes? What Entrepreneurs Can Do to Protect Their Business Now

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The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has triggered a seismic shift in U.S. labor policy, issuing a final rule that effectively bans new non-compete agreements. Long used to restrict worker mobility, these contracts are now in limbo after immediate legal challenges halted the rule.

This guide breaks down what you need to know to protect your business and turn disruption into advantage.

A deep dive into the FTC's final rule

The FTC's final rule declares that "non-compete clauses represent an unfair method of competition and therefore violate the FTC Act." This sweeping protection extends beyond employees to interns, contractors, volunteers and sole

proprietors, aiming to boost worker mobility and innovation. States are following suit – New York, for example, has proposed banning non-competes for lower-wage workers.

The key exception: Selling your business

The rule carves out an exception for founders and business owners: non-competes are still allowed in selling a business, ownership interest or substantial assets. This lets entrepreneurs include non-competes in exit deals, a common condition for preserving company value.

What about existing non-competes?

The FTC's rule is retroactive: most existing non-compete agreements will become unenforceable. An exception applies to senior executives – policy-making employees earning over $151,164 annually – whose current agreements remain valid. However, no new non-competes may be created or enforced, ensuring future workers cannot be restricted.

Related: What to Know About These Tricky Employment Agreements

The court challenge halting the rule

Business groups, joined by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, sued to block the FTC's non-compete ban. In July 2024, a Texas federal court issued a nationwide injunction, finding the FTC likely lacked authority. The ban is on hold, leaving businesses under state laws like the Texas Covenants Not to Compete Act.

The FTC's shifting stance adds uncertainty. With new leadership, the agency has asked for 60 more days to decide

whether to defend the non-compete ban, signaling it could be withdrawn or altered. For entrepreneurs, the takeaway is clear: even if the federal rule stalls, cultural and state-level momentum against non-competes is growing — making it wise to prepare for fewer talent restrictions.

Shifting from restriction to proactive protection

This period of legal uncertainty offers entrepreneurs a chance to modernize HR and compliance strategies. Proactive business owners can strengthen defenses now rather than wait for final court rulings.

This is precisely why proactive businesses are shifting their focus. It's no longer just about reacting to potential legal challenges; it's about building a framework that makes your company an employer of choice, insulating you from disputes in the first place.

Failing to adapt is costly: defending and settling an employment claim averages $75,000, while jury awards can reach $217,000 — making proactive compliance a smart business investment.

Related: 5 Situations That Require a Non-Disclosure Agreement

Your new legal toolkit

With non-competes in doubt, entrepreneurs must turn to narrower, more enforceable tools that protect business interests without blocking former employees from making a living.

- Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs): Essential for protecting proprietary information; must clearly define trade secrets without being overly broad.

- Non-Solicitation Agreements: Help safeguard clients and staff by preventing ex-employees from poaching for a set period; some jurisdictions allow limited clauses.
- Trade Secret Policies: Written policies should define trade secrets and establish strict handling procedures, strengthening legal protection.
- Invention Assignment Agreements: Critical in tech, creative and R&D fields to ensure employee-created IP belongs to the company.

When to seek expert guidance

Navigating state laws, federal rulings and the uncertain FTC non-compete rule is complex. With high-profile challenges and specialized cases emerging, expert counsel is vital to ensure agreements are enforceable and safeguard your business against litigation.

The decline of non-competes is a major opportunity for entrepreneurs. Without restrictive agreements, startups and small businesses can finally recruit top talent, once locked into big corporations, leveling the playing field and fueling a new wave of innovation.

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Winning the war for talent with culture, not contracts

Business owners must shift from restriction to retention. The best defense is a workplace where top people never want to leave — built on culture, loyalty, engagement and shared mission. Investing in your team is now your strongest competitive edge.

- **Focus on culture:** Create a positive, transparent and

rewarding work environment where people feel valued and psychologically safe.

- **Invest in growth:** Offer clear career paths, mentorship programs and professional development opportunities that show employees you are invested in their future.
- **Competitive compensation:** Ensure salaries, benefits and equity packages are competitive for your industry and geographic location.
- **Recognize and reward:** Implement formal and informal systems to acknowledge hard work, celebrate wins and reward your team members' valuable contributions.

Navigating the new frontier of employee mobility

Regardless of its final legal fate, the FTC's non-compete ban has fundamentally altered the conversation around employee rights and corporate strategy. For savvy entrepreneurs, this isn't a time for panic but for preparation.

You can position your business by strengthening your NDAs and other protective agreements, doubling down on a positive company culture that retains and attracts talent and viewing greater employee mobility as an opportunity rather than a risk. The era of locking in employees with restrictive contracts is ending; the era of winning their loyalty has begun.

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Before You Build an AI Product, Ask These 3 Questions (Most Founders Don’t)

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Too many founders start with the product. They get excited, build something, and then scramble to figure out if anyone actually wants it.

I almost did the same. Technically, I started by generating silly AI images of my boss to make my coworkers laugh. But when I saw the potential of the tools I was playing with — and how accessible they were becoming — I realized I could turn it into something real.

I didn’t have a background in AI or deep learning. But with

open-source tools like Stable Diffusion suddenly available, people like me could build things that felt like magic.

And like most entrepreneurs, I wanted to move fast. But instead of rushing to build, I gave myself a reality check. I asked three hard questions before writing a line of code. That checklist became the foundation of my business — and helped me avoid wasting months (and money) on a product no one wanted.

These same questions apply whether you're launching a SaaS company, a consumer product, a service-based business, or, yes, an AI tool.

Related: AI Isn't Plug-and-Play — You Need a Strategy. Here's Your Guide to Building One.

1. Is there real demand?

Before investing anything in product development, I set up a test. I opened an Etsy store selling AI-generated pet portraits during the holidays. It was clunky. Every order meant I was manually training models and fulfilling them by hand.

But people paid. They loved the results. It wasn't scalable — yet — but that didn't matter. It gave me proof:

- I could deliver something people genuinely valued
- They were willing to pay for it

This kind of early signal is more important than a sleek prototype or a detailed roadmap. For you, it might mean selling a simplified version of your offer, pre-selling a service, or running a paid pilot. The goal is the same: confirm there's real demand before you build at scale.

2. Will people pay me — and how?

After validating interest, I started experimenting with pricing. We tested $15, then $25. We ran ads on Reddit. Some worked, most didn't. I tried subscriptions — but quickly realized that running custom-trained models on demand was too expensive to support recurring plans at an early stage.

So I switched to a one-time payment model. Simple, low-friction, no complicated onboarding. We started at $9.99, and conversions were strong. Over time, we added higher-tier pricing — but from day one, the business had to make financial sense.

Many people advised offering a freemium version. I considered it, but GPU costs made that unrealistic. Instead, I built a free tool that looked like our main offering (an AI headshot generator) but was actually a low-cost background remover. It gave users a taste of the experience and warmed them up to buy. And it converted.

The takeaway? Revenue models aren't just about pricing — they're about sustainability. Founders often over-index on what's ideal for the user and forget what's viable for the business.

3. Can I actually reach people?

I didn't have an audience. I didn't have connections or media buzz. But I had Reddit.

I started joining threads where people were talking about AI headshots. I added value, offered comparisons, answered questions — and eventually, shared my own product. That got us our first 100 customers. We used Google Ads to scale to 1,000.

It wasn't viral. It wasn't pretty. But it worked. Why? Because I focused on solving the hardest part of distribution first:

attention and trust.

When people think about go-to-market, they think channels. But it’s better to think in terms of risk:

- Can you *find* the right people?
- Can you *earn* their attention?
- Can you *convert* them — without overspending?

If the answer is no, it doesn’t matter how good the product is.

Related: AI Will Define Your Brand If You Don’t — Here’s How to Take Control

Don’t build until you can answer these three questions

Every founder wants to build something great. But building too early — or on shaky assumptions — can kill even the best ideas.

A rough product built on real answers will always beat a polished one built on hope.

So before you start building or investing heavily in a new product or service, ask yourself:

- Who wants this right now?
- Will they pay?
- Can I reach them profitably?

Everything else can wait.

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How to Consistently Exceed Customer Expectations and Build Unshakeable Trust

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We’ve all heard the phrase, “underpromise and overdeliver.” Unfortunately, I often see businesses that tend to “overpromise and underdeliver,” failing to meet customers’ expectations.

For me, it all comes down to trust. Can I rely on a company to consistently meet and exceed my expectations? As entrepreneurs, this can be a difficult question to confront. However, if you’re unsure how to respond, it may be time to

reflect on your practices.

Consistently exceeding expectations earns appreciation from others. What we truly desire is trust. In a landscape filled with wannabes trying to mimic reputable companies, the most effective strategy to differentiate yourself is not only to meet expectations but also to exceed them and then offer a little bit more.

Related: If You Are Not Over Delivering for Your Customers, You're Not Doing Enough

Establish realistic expectations, then overdeliver

Unfortunately, today's consumers can grow accustomed to disappointment. That's why companies that set realistic expectations are better positioned to achieve a high level of customer satisfaction. Here's an example:

While driving to lunch last week, a radio ad for replacement auto windshields caught my attention. Instead of touting how wonderful and fast the installers work or how great the company's reviews and customer accolades are, the ad used a different strategy; they focused on realistic circumstances.

"We may not always be perfect. Sometimes our employees punch in the wrong number or have trouble locating your address. At other times, we might underestimate how much time an installation will take. No, we're not perfect, but you can rest assured that we'll always do our best, make things right when needed and do everything possible to earn and keep your business."

The ad definitely caught my attention because I appreciated the company's candor and honesty. In a world where most of us try to tune advertisements out, I'll consider using the company the next time I need my windshield repaired or

replaced.

Why? Because my employees and I at Ditto Transcripts sometimes make mistakes. In the transcription industry, where turnaround time, accuracy and confidentiality are paramount, securing our clients' trust and confidence remains our top priority. If we fail at any of these objectives, or if our transcripts don't meet our 99% accuracy guarantee, I'll do everything possible to correct the situation and satisfy the client as quickly as possible.

The hidden ROI of overdelivery

Most businesses strive to acquire new clients or customers, and on average, B2B companies can spend 20-50% of their annual revenue on this effort. Therefore, turning new clients into repeat customers is crucial for any company's success.

Given that repeat business is vital to our strategy and profitability, I personally review customer feedback and assess our service levels.

For example, our Google reviews may include statements such as:

- "Our transcripts were delivered early and accurately."
- "Their transcriptionist caught every word, even with poor audio quality."
- "You saved us, especially having such a tight deadline."

I genuinely appreciate it when our clients take the time to share positive feedback, as these reviews typically lead to repeat business. Moreover, when potential clients read favorable reviews, they are more likely to consider us for their transcription needs.

By ensuring our clients are satisfied with our work, we can

minimize or eliminate negative reviews. Always remember, taking the necessary steps to enhance customer satisfaction ultimately improves your return on investment (ROI) and bottom line.

Related: This Is the Real Secret to Exceeding Your Customer's Expectations

What overdelivery looks like

Often, it's the small gestures that leave a lasting impression. For instance, sending a thank-you email to a new client is usually appreciated. However, a handwritten note can generate an even stronger sense of gratitude. Paying attention to these small details can lead to greater rewards.

Consider what "overdelivery" looks like for your business. In our industry, it might include:

1. Delivering transcripts ahead of schedule
2. Proactively communicating with clients when issues arise
3. Adding speaker labels or formatting without being prompted
4. Following up with clients after delivery

It's important to note that "overdelivery" does not mean working for free or providing services at a significant loss. Instead, it involves exceeding client expectations through speed, accuracy, and quality. By focusing on successfully handling the small things, you may be surprised at the positive impact on your bottom line.

Common mistakes that erode trust

We've discussed many common mistakes that can erode trust and

lead to revenue loss. However, a few of these mistakes are worth repeating.

The first mistake is overcommitting while trying to secure new business. Most entrepreneurs have experienced this situation: Just as we're nearing the finish line and sensing that our prospect is about to commit, a couple of concerns arise. In an effort to close the deal, we may overpromise without a clear plan for how to meet the customer's expectations. Does that sound familiar?

Overpromising simply to close a deal often results in underperformance and dissatisfied customers. To avoid this, it's crucial to set realistic expectations from the start. Make sure to acknowledge the prospect's concerns and assure them that you'll develop a strategy to address their needs.

Additionally, maintain open communication with the client to ensure their needs are consistently met. If, for any reason, you find that you cannot meet their expectations, be honest and communicate this as well.

By establishing reasonable expectations, you and your team will have a better chance of overcoming challenges and pleasing the client. For example, saying, "Yes, Ms. Smith, I'm confident we can meet your 36-hour turnaround," and then delivering the transcript sooner can help build trust and encourage repeat business.

Build a culture of consistent overdelivery

Now that you understand the importance of underpromising and overdelivering, it's essential to instill this culture within your team. Leadership begins at the top, so ensure your employees comprehend your commitment to this approach. Focus not only on how this strategy benefits the company's bottom

line, but also on how it positively impacts individual employees.

Start by evaluating your hiring practices. Are you looking for employees who take pride in delivering exceptional service? Acknowledge those who go “above and beyond.” Building loyalty and trust within your organization often leads to happier employees and satisfied customers.

Create Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to improve quality control and internal communication. Ensure your team is clear about what they can and cannot do when handling customer issues. Proper training can enhance customer satisfaction and foster trust among your employees.

Recognize consistent performance, not only extraordinary actions. While many appreciate acknowledgement for outstanding customer service, it’s crucial not to overlook those team members who consistently deliver excellent service. These are the employees you want to retain and incentivize.

Empower your staff to make small decisions. Your sales team or customer service department typically interacts the most with clients and customers. Allow these employees to make minor concessions or resolve simple issues without needing to consult a manager.

Discuss both positive and negative customer reviews and identify ways to improve in both areas. Owners and managers often focus on negative reviews, especially when they mention specific employees, shifts or departments. While addressing negative feedback is necessary, it’s equally important to recognize those who contributed to positive experiences and discuss how to implement these successful practices throughout your organization.

Related: Trust Should Be the Foundation of Your Business — Here’s How to Earn It.

Trust still — and always — matters

The ability to underpromise and overdeliver is the cornerstone of many successful enterprises. The suggestions and recommendations I've outlined are more about common sense than complex strategies. However, every entrepreneur, including myself, needs constant reminders of their importance.

Every time your organization delivers more than it promised, your trust factor increases significantly. Consistently overdelivering helps build a strong culture of trust, both internally and externally.

The late Fred Smith, founder of FedEx, established a solid reputation by promising next-day and two-day package delivery. This positive reputation helped him secure a loyal customer base, even when his company's rates were higher than those of competitors. More importantly, Mr. Smith built trust through consistent performance.

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A Billionaire-Approved AI Private School With Half a Day of Recess Is Offering Teachers Six-Figure Pay

A new network of schools is disrupting the status quo with AI-generated lessons, six-figure pay for teachers, and the approval of hedge fund billionaire Bill Ackman.

Alpha School is a nationwide private school network that uses AI to customize learning for students from kindergarten through 12th grade. The typical Alpha School day consists of two hours of AI-generated academic learning for core subjects, followed by four hours of hands-on activities. The school claims that students learn twice as much as those following a standard system, per *The Wall Street Journal*. There is no homework, and parents receive daily data about how well their children are learning in school.

Related: ‘Now Accepting Applications’: Elon Musk Is Opening a New Preschool in Texas Called Ad Astra. Here’s How to Apply.

Ackman, who has a net worth of $8.28 billion according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index, posted about Alpha School on X last week, promoting the system and calling it a “truly breakthrough innovation.” He mentioned in his post that children in the Alpha school system “love school and have incredible outcomes.”

> *200 years ago K-12 ed was a teacher and a blackboard in front of 25-30 kids. Today, the only thing that has changed is the blackboard may be a whiteboard. And meanwhile the world is in the midst of an AI revolution.*
>
> *Check out @AlphaSchoolATX. The first truly breakthrough… https://t.co/0GfAhvtqHo*
>
> *— Bill Ackman (@BillAckman) August 20, 2025*

The schools charge tuition between $40,000 and $75,000, depending on the location.

The school was co-founded by MacKenzie Price, a Stanford graduate who created the two-hour learning model after her

daughters told her that school was boring. Her vision was to create a way for students to pursue core academics in just two hours a day, leaving the rest of the time open to experiential learning.

Teachers, who earn a minimum of $100,000, are referred to as “guides” because they “don’t do academic teaching,” Alpha School Principal Joe Liemandt explained on an episode of the “Invest Like the Best with Patrick O’Shaughnessy” podcast released on Tuesday. Instead of teachers outlining concepts on a board, students learn from devices assisted by AI.

For example, a job opening for a high school guide at Alpha School in Austin, Texas, asks for an individual who can teach students “how to grow authentic social media followings” and “connect students with relevant influencers,” instead of someone with a teaching degree.

Related: Y Combinator Helped Launch Reddit, Airbnb, and Dropbox. Here’s What I Learned From Its Free Startup School.

Liemandt said on the podcast that Alpha School keeps students motivated by leaning into game-like lesson plans created by AI. For example, students can “unlock” afternoon activities, like a five-mile bike ride, by finishing their two hours of classwork.

Students can also earn money by completing their coursework and use it to fund their interests, like investing. It’s unclear how much they can earn.

“Your kid can earn money by doing academics, so they can fund their passion projects,” Liemandt said on the podcast.

Alpha School is up and running in Texas, California, and Florida, with plans to launch schools in New York, Arizona, North Carolina, and Virginia later this year.

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