

Why Entrepreneurs Need to Do One Thing at a Time

The most successful entrepreneurs go small, not broad – and avoid distractions at all costs.

July 19, 2019 9 min read

Opinions expressed by *Entrepreneur* contributors are their own.

Back in 1897, Spanish neuroscientist Santiago Ramón y Cajal – winner of the Nobel Prize – wrote a book called *Advice for a Young Investigator*. He argued that instead of spending hours reviewing books, lectures and broad research, scientists should focus deeply on a single object of study. This state, he wrote, “refines judgment, enriches analytical powers, spurs constructive imagination, and – by focusing all light of reason on the darkness of a problem – allows unforeseen and subtle relationships to be discovered.”

Credit goes to Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, who introduced many of us to Ramón y Cajal in his 2018 book, *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less*. And yes, the founder of modern neuroscience was addressing 19th-century researchers, but his words are just as relevant – if not more so – for today’s entrepreneurs. We all have 24 hours in a day. Or as the online meme reminds us, “You have as many hours in a day as Beyoncé.”

So, why do some people seem to cram in so much more? Why do some founders earn more, accomplish more, produce more? Author Gary Keller would argue that these (literal and metaphorical) rock stars go small.

“When you want the absolute best chance to succeed at anything you want, your approach should always be the same,” he writes

in his 2013 book, *The ONE Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results*, “‘Going small’ is ignoring all the things you could do and doing what you should do. It’s recognizing that not all things matter equally and finding the things that matter most.”

Keller’s advice also reminds me of the expression, “you can do anything, but you can’t do everything.” It’s a phrase I’ve taken to heart as I’ve slowly bootstrapped my company, JotForm. For the last 13 years, we’ve grown a simple idea into one product that now serves five million users. We don’t chase side projects – and all of our employees are dedicated to the same, ever-evolving product.

Sometimes, you do need to test and experiment. We need to sample, taste and find inspiration across disciplines. But to create something that truly moves the needle, you have to focus. Here are several ways to harness the power of “going small” in your business.

Pick the smallest place to start.

Keller’s advice to “go small” applies on several levels. First, you need to identify your core project, product or offering. Once you have a clear goal, it’s time to further narrow your focus. What’s the smallest version you could create that would still produce results? This is the same principle, of course, as creating an MVP, or minimum viable product, but it also works for activities as varied as hiring, marketing, and design. Determine the smallest way you could execute on a task, then gather feedback, refine, and keep building.

Related: 4 Mistakes Entrepreneurs Make When Building an MVP

Automate your systems

Systems aren't exciting, but they are essential. Creating efficient processes and automating repetitive tasks frees up valuable time to pursue what's important. You'll have more energy for that "one thing."

Until recently, our IT admins were constantly fixing server issues in the middle of the night. Every time it happened, I emphasized the need for a solution that didn't require 3 a.m. troubleshooting. Yet, our team was used to working on call. I think they took pride in their ability to extinguish fires at all hours – and while I appreciated their commitment, there had to be a better way.

Eventually, we installed automated systems that notify us when the servers reach specific capacity thresholds. We receive an early warning, so we never hit that 95 percent panic zone. We automated a key system – and we're all sleeping better at night.

Related: 12 Ways to Automate Your Business and Boost Efficiency

Streamline your collaborations.

Good leaders enable everyone else to focus: Orchestras need conductors. Sports teams have coaches. Police and firefighters lean on their captains.

At JotForm, our cross-functional teams of five or six people also have leaders. These are employees who can make quick, smart decisions. They excel at listening and gathering information, then developing strategies that move the group closer to its goals.

As a founder, you automatically assume a leadership role. Whether you continue to hold that role depends on your

personality, skills, funding and company status. As James Kwak wrote in *The Atlantic*, “the conventional wisdom among investors, if not the media, is that founders need to move out of the way for an experienced CEO to take a company ‘to the next level.’”

Yet, according to Kwak, data shows that “first executives really do make better chief execs,” because they have better long-term focus, more value and the right incentives.

Whatever your circumstances, strong leadership is essential for success. Knowing someone is steering the ship with confidence and foresight allows the whole team to pursue meaningful projects. If you’re a solopreneur, don’t forget to step back from the day-to-day blur of running your business and take stock. Be your own leader.

Embrace your constraints

Doing one thing at a time doesn’t mean boring yourself into routine efficiency. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. As author James Clear explains, constraints drive creativity. “It is common to complain about the constraints in our lives: too little time, not enough money, too small of a network, barely enough resources,” writes Clear. “Certainly, some of these constraints do hold us back. However, there is also a positive side. The constraints in our lives often force us to make choices and cultivate talents that would otherwise go undeveloped.”

Clear’s words also apply to entrepreneurs and the companies we build. For most startups, money is always at a premium. Time passes at warp speed. And we often struggle to find the right talent. Yet, these constraints can force you to be smart and scrappy. Harness your focus – and both internal and external boundaries – as a source of innovation.

Related: How Constraints Make You Better: A Surprising Lesson

Resist the urge to multitask

Never before have we had such an array of distractions, right at our fingertips. This isn't exactly breaking news, but I was shocked to learn that there's a strong correlation between focus and happiness. In other words, multitasking can make us miserable.

In 2010, Harvard University psychologists Matthew A. Killingsworth and Daniel T. Gilbert published a study that showed people spend nearly 47 percent of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they're currently doing.

"Mind-wandering is an excellent predictor of people's happiness," explains Killingsworth. "In fact, how often our minds leave the present and where they tend to go is a better predictor of our happiness than the activities in which we are engaged."

Focusing makes us feel better. And whether you're starting a business or writing sales copy, single-tasking not only promotes better results, but you'll enjoy the process more, too.

Related: Why Multitasking is Blocking Your Path to Success

How to stay focused

It's easy to preach the gospel of doing one thing at a time, but it is difficult to actually do, especially when business-building pulls you in several directions at once. Two techniques consistently help me to focus on what matters:

1. Box your time

Setting limits can boost motivation and productivity. Consider that “one thing” that will move you forward and then draw a time boundary around your work. Turn off all notifications, find a place where you won’t be disturbed, and get laser-focused for a set period of time. The Pomodoro Technique is an example of this strategy. It breaks each work session into 25-minute sprints followed by five-minute breaks.

You can also use timeboxing for bigger projects. Decide, for example, that you’ll spend three months (no more and no less) working toward a specific goal. Set a boundary and stay the course.

Related: Why the Pomodoro Technique Is Failing You

2. Protect your energy

Going small can also conserve and increase your energy, which, as a founder, is your most important resource. We all know the basics, which include getting enough sleep, making time for exercise and eating well. But just like boxing your time, you can also intentionally shift your energy toward those top priorities.

For example, if I have an important presentation or interview coming up, I avoid unnecessary meetings. I get more rest and do what I can to stay relaxed in the days and hours before the event.

As Entrepreneur contributing writer Deep Patel explains, insecurity, self-doubt and fear are also energy killers: “Those negative feelings rob you of confidence and undermine your ability to bounce back from adversity.”

Instead of listening to critical inner thoughts, Patel advises founders to lean on their inner strength and the resilience

they've cultivated over time. "Recognize that you are strong and capable," writes Patel, "equipped to handle whatever is thrown your way."

<https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/335732>