

Why Now Is the Right Time to Team Up With a New Advisor

Whether you are in search of a single advisor or building an advisory board, different professionals can strategically elevate your business. Right now just might be the time to find them.

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Building a high growth company, innovating new products and raising money is a challenge under any circumstances. But with a crashing economy and businesses in a holding pattern, accelerating your startup in these unprecedented times is an especially isolating uphill climb for founders. The bright side is that CEOs do not have to face all difficult decisions alone. Now is an optimal time to reach out to advisors or secure new ones.

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An expertly selected advisor or a curated advisory board can help navigate early-stage companies through the unknown. Industry leaders, academics and repeat entrepreneurs alike might be looking to dive into new opportunities and avail their services to founders as the nation reopens. This is the moment to re-evaluate the next steps and determine what tactical offensive actions you can take. The challenges we are facing now present a business-defining opportunity to target and assemble a dream advisory board.

The goal

No one has all the answers, even if this is not your first attempt at being a founder. An advisor can offer an independent perspective and impartial guidance. They can provide access and reach to resources, serve as a test customer or salesperson, be a cheerleader and at other times serve as an unbiased critic. A well-chosen advisor will guide you through your industry and all its hurdles and nuances. As seasoned professionals, they not only know how to avoid the pitfalls but also can help broaden your vision to look beyond the short term horizon. Connecting with a well-matched advisor with aligned incentives will put you in a better position to set and execute your goals.

To encourage an advisor to help you along your path, you should be able to clearly define what you want from this relationship. While the advisor is neither a co-founder nor an employee, they must be on board with your aspirations. What are your greatest concerns for your startup, and how do you envision your advisor guiding you? Did they work with previous advisees? Does their method match your style and/or your needs? And remember, even though your advisor is an expert, they are not a mind reader. Communication is key. Let your advisor know when and where you need help and how they can assist you in navigating through the roughest waters.

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What to look for

Whether you are in search of a single advisor or building an advisory board, different professionals can strategically elevate your business:

1. Industry leaders – An executive with a big name in your

vertical whose legacy and reputation are impeccable can be an excellent resource for an early-stage founder. This kind of advisor can open doors to top industry talent, first customers, strategic partnerships, etc. Recently retired industry experts are ideal, as they come without complicated conflicts of interest.

2. Academics – If your industry is in a highly specialized field, an academic advisor can lend confidence by serving as a development partner. Technical advisor support can range from evaluating your tech stack from a different perspective, to assisting in the creation of your product.
3. Repeat entrepreneurs – This type of advisor has the practical hands-on experience critical to helping a similar business grow. Repeat entrepreneurs who have both failed and succeeded, and who have learned how to pivot and rebound, are ideal advisors. From fundraising, go-to-market, building teams and landing and expanding customers, successful repeat entrepreneurs have experienced this process first-hand and will support you in the difficult times and champion you in the good ones.
4. Ecosystem personalities – Famous, big personalities established in the ecosystem can help promote your brand and create confidence with customers. They can help you attain a positive reputation before your product even hits the market, positioning you for success.

Although you want an advisor who has experience in the area of your startup, you do not want someone with similar skill sets. Your advisor should offer knowledge or expertise that complements and expands upon your own. They can provide an added perspective while building the product or service as well as add clout to your introduction into the industry. This is especially key for emerging first-time founders.

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Making connections

Although every founder has different needs and expectations from their advisory board, one point remains the same: You want advisors who have experience in your field. Here are some recommendations for making those connections:

- Create your ideal list of advisors and research all lines for warm introductions. This could come from the network you have already begun to establish and from the networks of your investors who can help facilitate those connections.
- Be active in (virtual) events around your industry. Seek out other founders who can provide you with insights on advisors. Get to know people. Build friendships and working relationships to expand your network and reach.
- After you have worked your existing connections, consider making cold introductions. Although you might question the success rate of this approach, given our current work-from-home situation, these leaders might have more time and interest in emerging startup opportunities. Do not be afraid to reach out to the big personalities and famous names in your field. They might just say yes.
- Think creatively and take bold steps to foster new relationships. Host a webinar and ask a prospective advisor to join as a panelist or co-host, invite an industry leader to co-author an article with you or join in on a social media campaign.

Always keep in mind that this activity is also a selling proposition, and make it clear what is unique about this opportunity at your startup and what you are offering in exchange for their guidance.

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Founders must figure out how to go forward with their business operations and develop strategies on how to adapt to variable conditions. Leaders with 20-plus years of experience who have successfully weathered the dot com bubble burst and the past financial crisis can offer their learnings to ground you through all of the unknown hurdles ahead.

Although the world continues to cope with the health crisis and its impact, that is not going to be the case forever. Soon enough, the world will move forward. Right now you have a window to reach out to potential advisors, especially industry leaders and academics who may have a lull in their time commitments. With little-to-no travel happening, with conferences and large meetings canceled or virtual, and with university openings in an uncertain state, they might welcome a new opportunity to help founders develop an offensive strategy for a resurgence. Teaming up with an advisor now will help you get the ball rolling progressively toward our post-crisis world.

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