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DISASTER AVOIDANCE PLANNING FOR SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS MANAGERS

It's a strange thing - owning your own business. Often-times, Murphy's Law seems to be the rule rather than the exception. You find yourself looking toward the sky and wondering if you've been randomly selected by God for a test of willpower and intestinal fortitude. Sometimes, it seems as if all the other businesses on your block have it easier than you do. Customers are flocking to their doors. They don't have the employees challenges you do. Their equipment doesn't break down. They seem to have all the luck. Luck? Nonsense!

Luck is using planning to take advantage of opportunity. Planning has been and always will be, absolutely essential to the successful operation of any business. Oh, there are a few exceptions. Occasionally someone does get rich in a "get-rich-quick" scheme. Sometimes, someone stumbles onto a fad (Remember Pet Rocks?) in which they can't keep up with the demand. But remember this the next time you read an advertisement or see an "info-mercial" for a get-rich-quick scheme, No one ever comes on TV and tells you how much they lost. Winners brag. Losers crawl under their pet rock and hope no one notices they lost their families savings on some scheme.

The truth is that far more people become successful by slow deliberate planning and growth. Your cleaning business is no exception. But, perhaps, you don't want to plan. You've got enough troubles just making it through the end of the week, much less worrying about 1998. But the truth of the matter is, that if you had planned, you would be making today's decisions based upon the proper information. That does not mean you wouldn't have any problems. What it does mean though, is that you would not be compounding those problems by making rash, uneducated decisions on how to deal with them. A business plan is not designed to solve all of your business's problems; it is a blueprint by which educated decisions can be made to attempt to solve them.

"Well then," you might say, "what are the specific benefits of planning my business's future?" First, a plan gives you a route to follow in your decision making. If you want to get involved in fire damage restoration, the you know what steps need to be taken in order to get there. This routing can map out a strategy by taking your business from bad times to good; or it can map out a strategy if business is good on how to stay there. Just as you need instructions to put together your children's toys on Christmas Eve, your business needs a step-by-step guide on getting where you want it to go.

Secondly, a plan makes it easier for you to understand the amount of money that is going to be necessary for you to take those steps. It can make it easier for your bank to be of assistance to you. Instead of just saying, "Oh, it'll take too much money to do that," you will know exactly how much will be required. Not until you know how much money it is going to take, you can begin to take steps to secure that financing.

Third, a plan communicates to every member of your firm exactly where the company is headed. Too often, the "push me-pull you" concept dominates an organization simply because "where this business is headed" has never been properly communicated to the employee. Your employees are the essential element in the success of your cleaning business. Not only must they know the goal, but they must also be presented with the steps on how to get there. Very often, they will amaze you with their inventiveness simply because the boundaries under which they were to operate had been properly defined. If the goal is to increase add-on sales in 1995, then they should know they need to work on selling techniques and become more educated in fabric protectors, anti-stats, anti-microbials — how they work and what the benefit is to the customer. They need to know enough about drapery or upholstery cleaning to explain its advantages and benefits to the customers.

Fourth, a business plan will help you personally, develop as a manager. It will assist you in thinking about and planning for dealing with future problems. For example, how about that sometimes inevitable business slowdown in the winter months? Too many cleaners depended upon getting lots of water damage restoration during the fall and winter of '94-95, and it just didn't happen. Now they are operating without a plan from a crisis mode. How will you handle competitive pressures and situations? A plan forces you to put into writing all of those brilliant ideas you have been keeping to yourself. If you know how to run your business better than anyone else, then you must implement the strategies which you have in the back of your mind to allow your business to grow. Putting those ideas into a form where you can be reminded of them is the only way to begin implementation.

Of course, in order for a business plan to do you any good, you have to know what business you are in. That may sound simple, but too many cleaning companies have no idea of what business they are in. Are you a carpet cleaner, or are you a fabric specialist? Are you a gripe handler, or are you a problem solver? Do your customers view you as someone who costs them several hundred dollars for you to visit them, or do they view you as someone who is saving them thousands of dollars through the care and maintenance of one of their largest investments — their carpet, upholstery and drapes. We are bordering on the fringe of marketing here, and that's not our purpose for this article. So suffice it to say, how well your plan helps your business may very well depend on how you view your business. Positive thoughts beget positive results. Negative thoughts beget negative results.

"Okay, then," you may say, "how do I plan?" A plan starts with goals. "Oh no!", you say. Every motivational speaker since the beginning of time talks about goals. Well, that's because goals work. Goal setting is an end toward which effort or ambition is directed. Once you have set your goals, then you can determine what it will take to accomplish that goal — no matter how far fetched it may sound. Then you make a step-by-step plan on how to reach that goal. If you think you can reach Step 1, then implement your strategy to do that. If not, the Step 1 becomes a goal and you make a step-by-step plan on how to reach that goal. And so on, until you find something you can accomplish. Lo and behold! You have a business plan — and you're on your way.

Once you have constructed this plan, then you have what it takes to make educated decisions — information! Once you have the information, your decisions may not always be right; but at least you know they were the best decisions you could make based upon the planning information you had at the time. Try it — you may surprise yourself. And you and your business will reap the rewards. Mediocre business managers rarely make or follow through on plans. Successful business managers always know they did the best they could.

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